

DOOM IS BACK WHY HELL HAS NEVER LOOKED BETTER
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DARK SOULS III
MIYAZAKI PUMPS FRESH BLOOD INTO HARDCORE GAMING
THE REVIVAL OF STRATEGY
WHY TACTICAL GAMES ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF A RENAISSANCE
OCULUS RIFT LAUNCH SPECIAL
ONE GIANT LEAP
NO MAN'S SKY
WE EXPLORE THE UNIVERSE, TRADE WITH ALIENS, AND BATTLE SPACE PIRATES WITH HELLO GAMES
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ISSUE 172
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PARAGON ■ TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER ■ FAR CRY PRIMAL ■ YO-KAI WATCH
DYING LIGHT: THE FOLLOWING ■ FIREWATCH ■ NUCLEAR THRONE ■ UNRAVEL
PROJECT X ZONE 2 ■ PLANTS VS ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE 2 ■ PONY ISLAND

I guess it must have been around 2009 when I first met the Hello Games team. All four of them showed up on our doorstep to demo their first creation as an indie studio: *Joe Danger*. It was fully playable, but still many months away from getting a release. In fact, as I recall, it didn't even have a confirmed platform. And so we sat and played and chatted about this wonderful little game they had created as the first step towards shaking off the shackles of triple-A development.

I don't bring this up to reflect on the good old days when developers were knocking on our door and we could speak directly to the creators without interference from press officers and producers. Those days are even further back, largely before I even started writing about games. No, that was as unique an experience then as it would be now and it spoke to the openness and earnestness of this team that they wanted to demo *Joe Danger* in person and together.

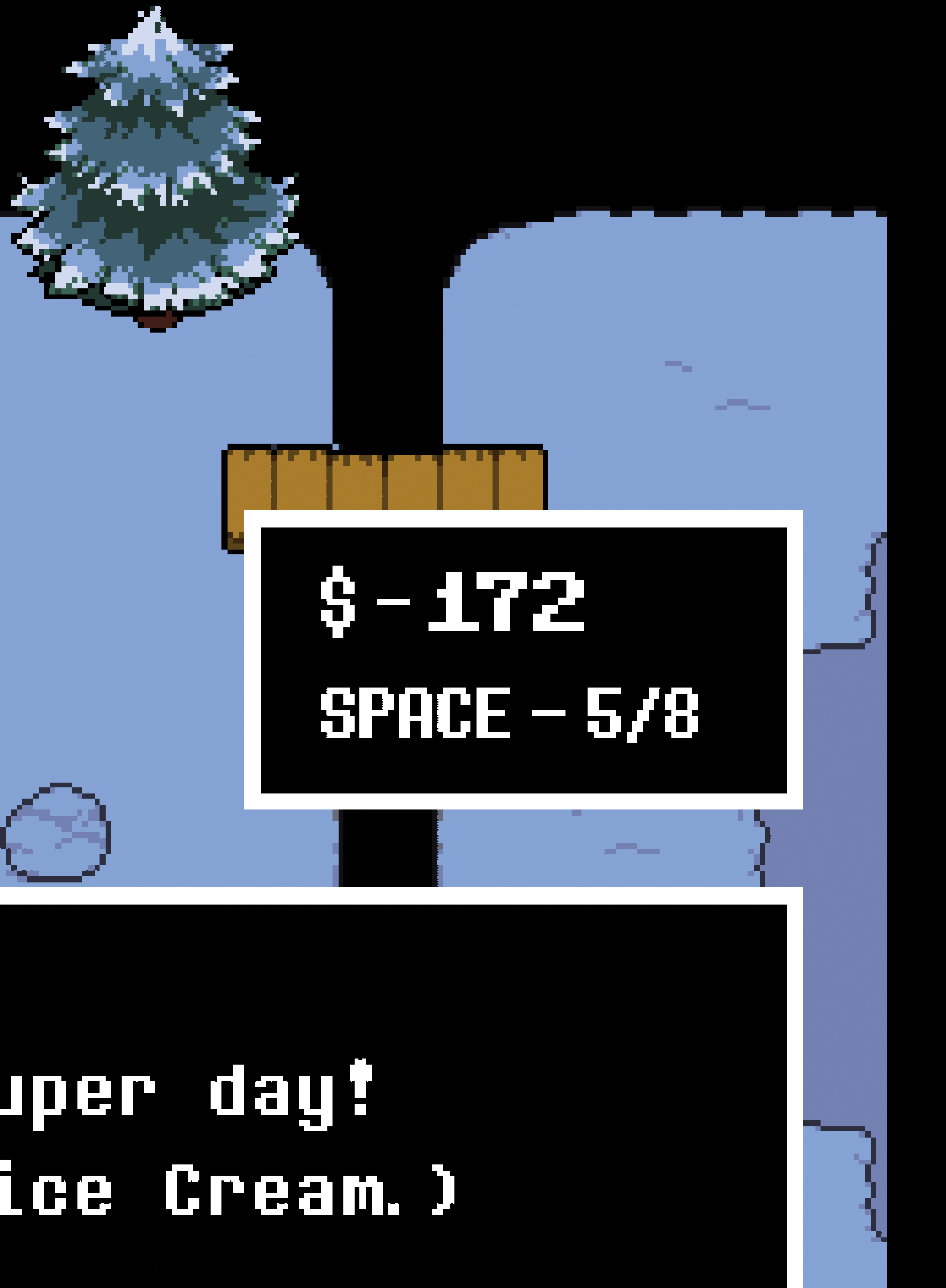
Seven years later and about a dozen staff larger, that spirit of openness and shared responsibility as well as credit pervades in their Guildford office. *No Man's Sky* is bigger and more sprawling than their stuntman creation, but it's no less personal and I think that might be the secret ingredient that makes it so special.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



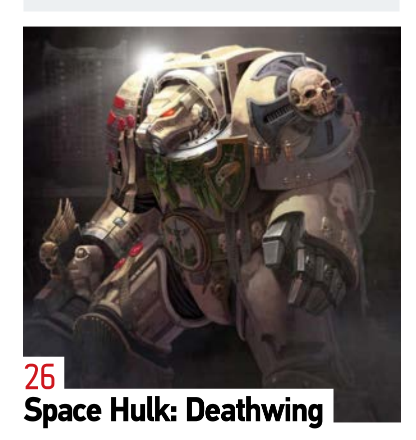

* Here you go!
* Have a super-
* (You got the


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uper day!
ice Cream.)

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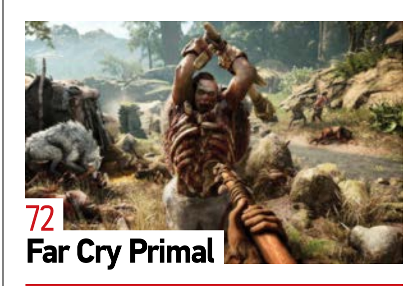
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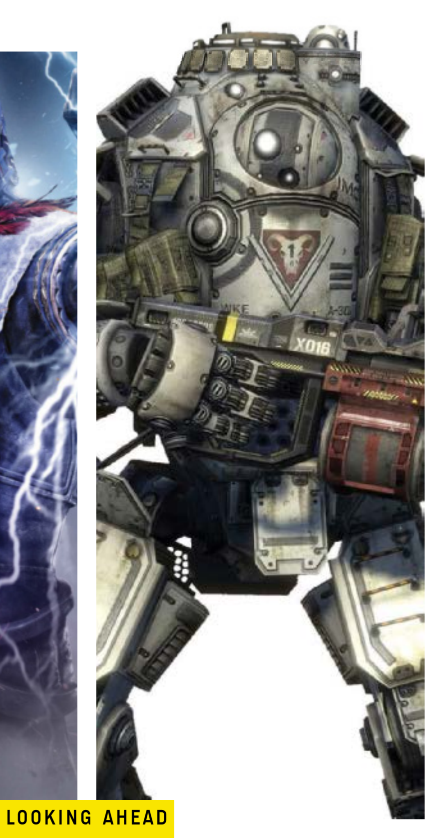
NO MAN'S SKY

We explore the universe, trade with aliens and battle space pirates with Hello Games

Discuss

NEWS
INDUSTRY GOSSIP
OPINION
YOUR VIEWS







LOOKING AHEAD

The blockbusters start lining up

→ Here's what to expect from the biggest franchises over the next 13 months

As the sun set on 2015, it was easy enough for us to take a step back and declare it a banner year for the current generation – the year open worlds expanded, storytelling evolved and, in many respects, gaming grew up. But through all of the good gaming times, fond memories shared, and accolades awarded across the winter months, it's also worth remembering that it too was a year peppered with small, but regular disappointments.

Because for every release with the impact of *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, and *Life Is Strange*, there seemed to be an accompanying, heartbreaking, delay. That means 2016 is already packed with the likes of *The Division*, *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, *Gears Of War 4*, and yes, (finally) *Uncharted 4* – it's likely to be another incredible year, basically. In spite of all of this though, there were still a handful of big industry mainstays that were MIA. The financial reports have changed all of that, and the news is likely to leave a lot of you caught between sadness and hope.

Sadness, that many of your favourite franchises will not be returning in the next 13 months – hell, even sadness that some of your least favourites *will be* returning. Hope, that this will finally give publishers and developers alike enough time to get their act together. We know we've had enough of the broken launch day servers, game-breaking bugs and litany of annoying glitches, how about you?

Ubisoft has made a huge statement of intent for the fiscal year: promising the successful launches of *Far Cry Primal*, *For Honor*, *Ghost Recon Wildlands* and *South Park: The Fractured But Whole* before 31 March 2017. Considering Ubi's track record, that's already looking pretty packed, but it still went ahead and confirmed that an all-new 'high-potential, triple-A' IP was in development, as is *Watch Dogs 2*.

Little is known about the new IP, aside from Ubisoft CFO Alain Martinez commenting that it would have "strong digital live service offer," which could literally mean anything at this stage – because we all love Uplay, right? *Watch*

DATA STREAM → WARREN SPECTOR HAS JOINED THE DEVELOPER OF SYSTEM SHOCK 3 AS DIRECTOR

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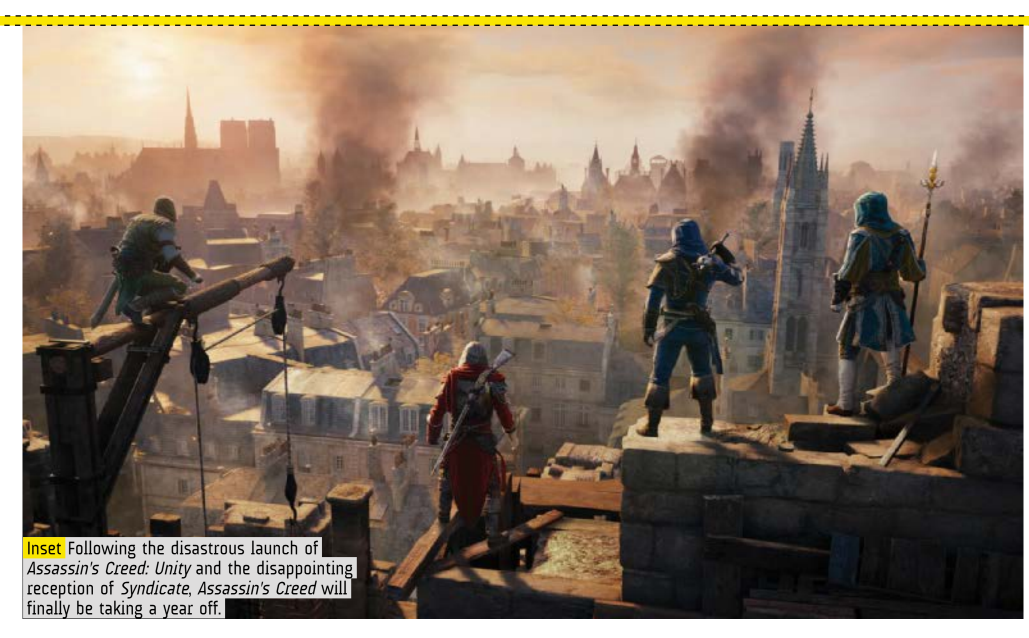
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Inset Following the disastrous launch of *Assassin's Creed: Unity* and the disappointing reception of *Syndicate*, *Assassin's Creed* will finally be taking a year off.



Dogs 2 is a surprise announcement though, especially as its debut wasn't exactly the huge success everybody was expecting it to be. But Ubisoft needs something to fill a gap in the market, a large void that hasn't existed since 2008 – there will be *no* major *Assassin's Creed* title this year.

"This year, we also are stepping back and re-examining the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. As a result, we've decided that there will not be a new *Assassin's Creed* game in 2016," read an official statement, as jaws dropped from Abstergo to Reddit.

"Since the release of *Assassin's Creed Unity*, we've learned a lot based on your feedback. We've also updated our development processes and recommitted to making *Assassin's Creed* a premier open-world franchise," the statement continued. "We're taking this year to evolve the game mechanics and to make sure we're delivering on the promise of *Assassin's Creed* offering unique and

Above The rumours leaking out of Ubisoft have pointed towards *Watch Dogs* shifting from Chicago to San Francisco for the sequel, expected to launch winter 2016.

Reader Reaction

Your reaction to the sequel announcements

Watch Dogs 2 is in development, how does that make you feel?
- Excited to see it
- Pretty upset
- Don't care

Are you happy Assassin's Creed is taking a year off?
- Too little, too late
- No, I'll miss it
- Absolutely

Respawn is reportedly putting a huge focus on single-player for Titanfall 2, but is it a necessary addition?
- Mildly Interested
- Unnecessary
- Excited to play it!

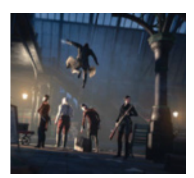

HTC VIVE PREORDERS BROKE THROUGH 15,000 UNITS ONLY TEN MINUTES AFTER GOING ON SALE



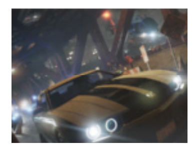



Inset Bungie has a lot of work to do now to restore faith in *Destiny*, following a somewhat turbulent year; whether a full sequel will be enough remains to be seen.

> "Watch Dogs 2 will need to finally step up and prove it's capable of becoming a triple-A franchise"



Above Ubisoft hasn't announced what it is likely to do with *Assassin's Creed*, but we imagine it will take the time to enhance the gameplay mechanics and shift to a more open-ended design.



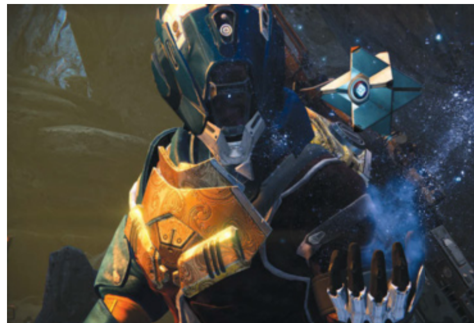
Above You have to wonder how much Ubisoft will need to change to make *Watch Dogs* live up to its potential, the first was a huge missed opportunity.

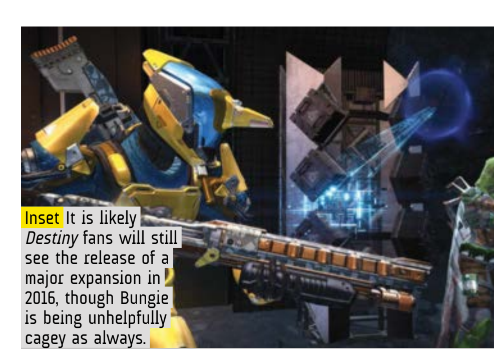
memorable gameplay experiences that make history everyone's playground."

While it looks like Ubisoft is finally reacting to the backlash to *Assassin's Creed Unity* numerous performance problems, it's more likely that it is in fact reacting to the poor sales of last year's *Syndicate*. The London-based adventure underperformed on the shelves, falling well short of publisher expectations and previous entries in the series. AC 2017 likely won't show up at E3, though rumours have it placed in Ancient Egypt and set as a prequel to the entire franchise – potentially as the beginning of a new trilogy that also spans Rome and Greece. In a year where Michael Fassbender is leading an all-new *Assassin's Creed* movie, it's shocking to think Ubisoft isn't looking to milk the proverbial cash cow – but that's where a (rumoured) San Francisco bound *Watch Dogs 2* will need to step up and prove it's capable of becoming a triple-A franchise.

While Ubisoft is struggling with its big hitters, EA and Activision are also struggling to sort their 2016 line-ups out too. *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* isn't garnering the excitement EA may have expected, while *Mass Effect Andromeda* is now looking at an early 2017 release. Activision isn't fairing much better, with *Titanfall 2* fears starting to mount, and fans are beginning to revolt against *Destiny*; an act of defiance that is in no way helped by the news that a full sequel to *Destiny* won't be arriving any time soon.

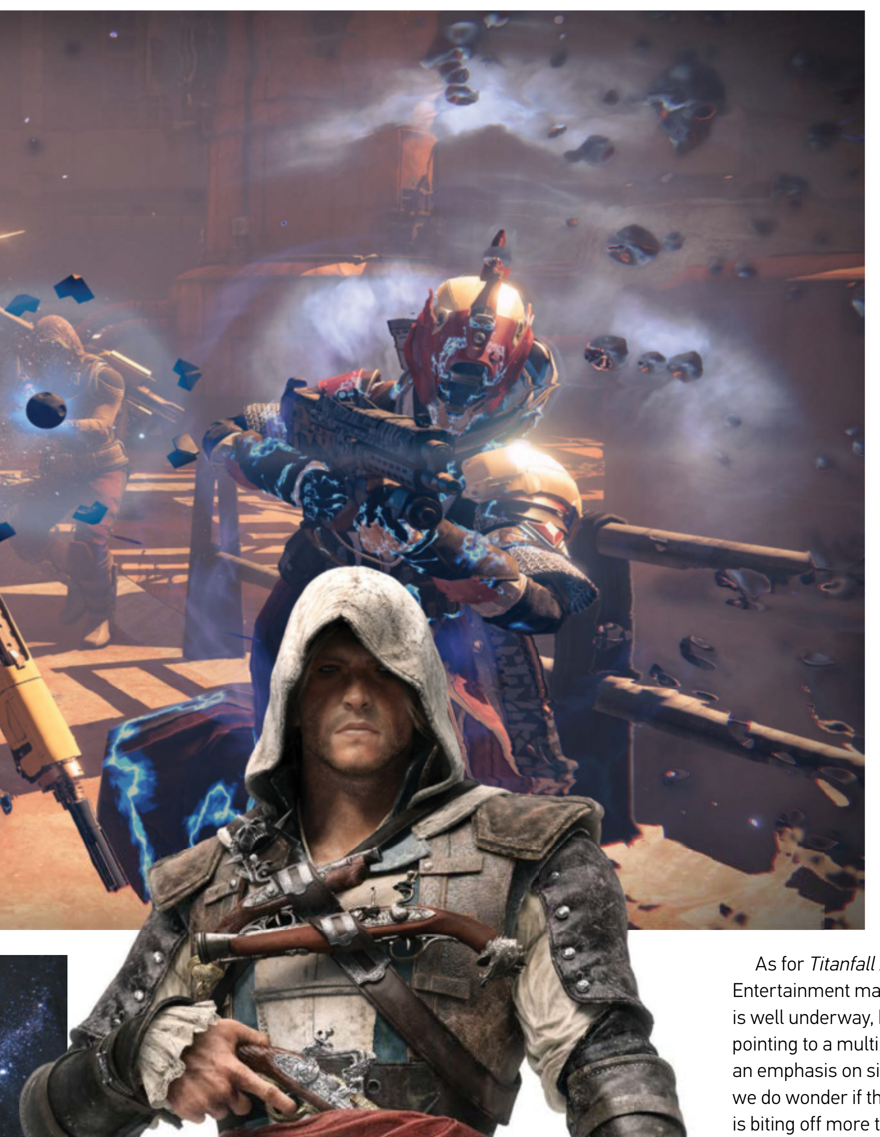
Bungie keeps promising that a "second, larger update [is] slated for spring," though it's nowhere in sight. A lack of regular communication continues to hamper *Destiny*, as fans eagerly await a follow-up to *The Taken King* to justify their hundreds – if not thousands – of hours spent. The spring update will supposedly "feature a significant Light increase, a bunch of new gear to earn and equip, and new challenges for *PvE* players seeking some more fun experiences and replayability," essentially setting the stage for a "large expansion later in the year". Whether that will be enough to keep players interested ahead of a full sequel in 2017 remains to be seen.



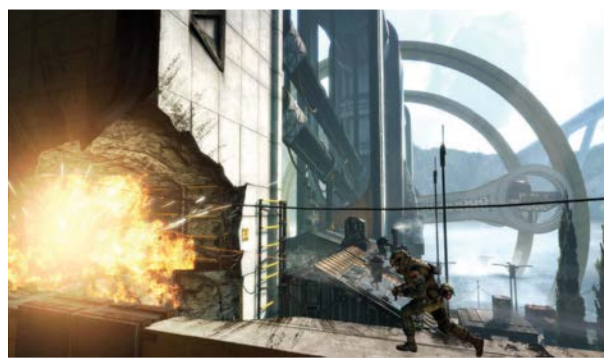


Inset It is likely *Destiny* fans will still see the release of a major expansion in 2016, though Bungie is being unhelpfully cagey as always.

DATA STREAM → THE WRITER'S GUILD HAS GIVEN RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER AN AWARD FOR ITS SCRIPT



Below 2016 is going to be a great year, but it's also exciting to see 2017 take shape with the likes of *Titanfall 2*, *Destiny 2*, *Cyberpunk 2077* and the unnamed *Visceral Star Wars* games already on the horizon.





As for *Titanfall 2*, developer Respawn Entertainment maintains that production is well underway, but with all signs pointing to a multiplatform release *and* an emphasis on single-player campaign, we do wonder if the relatively small team is biting off more than it can chew. Lead writer Jesse Stern has already gone on record with Forbes, claiming that, with *Titanfall 2*, Respawn is "doing [its] best to deliver a vision of grand global colonial warfare retelling the story of the American Revolution and the American Civil War in space," while insinuating that the sequel will "portray a world in which science meets magic, but a world which will still be 'grounded, dirty, human and real.'"

Thanks to a leak from Todd McFarlane toys, of all places, the emphasis on character and single-player is again pointed to. "The hotly anticipated *Titanfall 2* will deliver the frantic action fans have come to love, plus dramatically charged cinematic moments through all-new memorable characters," read a press release, while pointing to a release for the game before the end of 2016. So long as the sequel maintains its high-intensity multiplayer action, we can't imagine we'll be reacting poorly to the introduction of a full single-player campaign – it's interesting to see that's where the emphasis lies though, especially with rumours circulating that a *Titanfall* TV series might move into active production in the near future.

As it stands, if everything stays on track, 2016 will be another banner year for gaming. There are some gargantuan titles on the horizon and room for a few surprises. All eyes will be on *Watch Dogs 2*, to see whether Ubisoft can turn it into the franchise it so desperately wants it to be; on *Titanfall 2*, to see if Respawn can maintain success with its hit new IP; and on *Destiny*, to see whether Bungie can finally achieve a sustainable and fun experience. All we can say for certain is that 2016 is looking very strong, and there's plenty to look forward to in 2017 too.

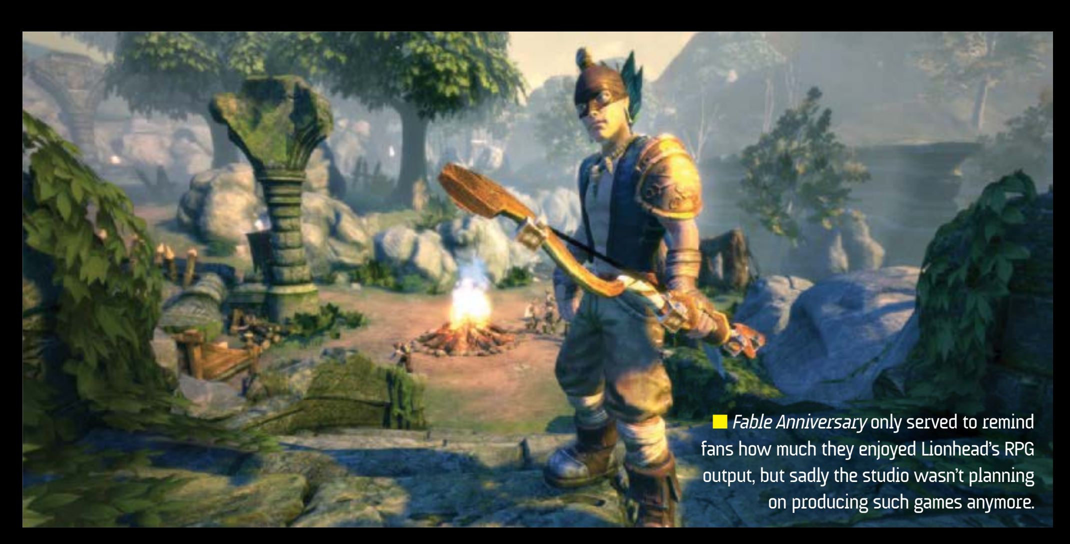
4 BILLION SESSIONS OF FALLOUT SHELTER HAVE BEEN PLAYED ON IOS AND ANDROID SAYS BETHESDA

LIONHEAD STUDIOS: 1996 – 2016

Every adventure has to come to an end

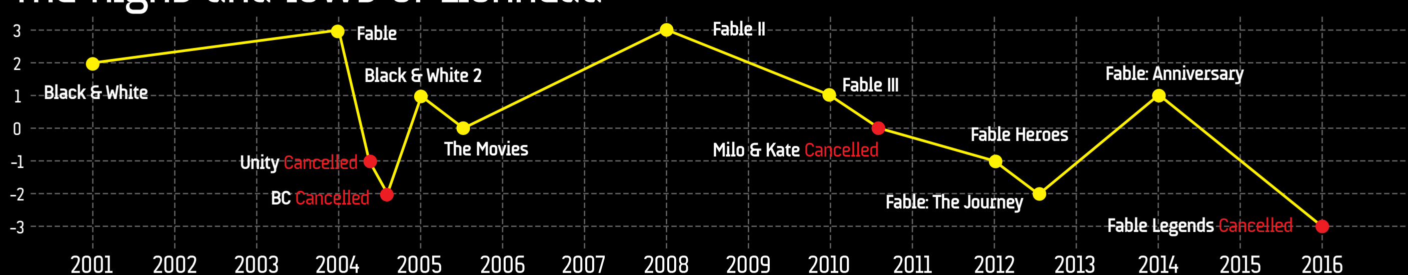
→ Looking back over 20 years of Lionhead, as Microsoft shuts down the famed British developer

"After much consideration we have decided to cease development on *Fable Legends*, and are in discussions with employees about the proposed closure of Lionhead Studios in the UK." That statement from Microsoft Studios Europe general manager Hanno Lemke unceremoniously marks the end of an era. Twenty years after the studio first opened its doors – and ten years after Microsoft acquired it – Lionhead is no more. With the future of the *Fable* franchise unclear, all we can do now is thank the famed British development studio for the good memories and hope the 100+ staff that were working away on *Legends* land on their feet soon enough.



■ *Fable Anniversary* only served to remind fans how much they enjoyed Lionhead's RPG output, but sadly the studio wasn't planning on producing such games anymore.

The highs and lows of Lionhead



Disappearing act

These four other studios were also mysteriously removed from Microsoft Studios' official website on the day Lionhead and Press Play were shut down



Big Park

Originally responsible for driving NFL integration with the Xbox 360 and Xbox One forward, the studio has seemingly been consolidated into the Microsoft Game Studios machine as entertainment takes a back seat to gaming.



Function Studios

Described as an "incubation team at Microsoft Studios under the Xbox division," Function was responsible for "[bringing] new technologies to the consumer as we did with the Kinect." Now rumoured to be working on HoloLens.



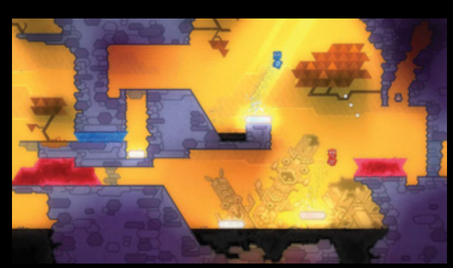
Good Science

Responsible for working on the original Kinect tech – as well as the likes of *Kinect Adventures*, *Fun Labs* and *Star Wars* – Good Science is heavily rumoured to be working on launch titles for the upcoming HoloLens tech.



SOTA

Started alongside many of the other studios listed here, SOTA was rumoured to be working on innovative new Kinect titles for Xbox One alongside Good Science, Function and LXP – though the backlash against Kinect seems to have ended it.



The sad demise of Press Play

■ Buried by word that Lionhead would be closed, we also received the sad news that the studio behind *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood* and *Kalimba* would see its doors shut after the release of two critically-acclaimed Xbox exclusives. The small studio from Denmark was hard at work on *Knoxville*, a survival game due for release in 2016, though that too has been cancelled following the internal shake-up. At the time of writing, Microsoft has yet to give a reason as to why the studio has closed, though it seems likely that the poor sales of *Kalimba* could have been a big reason behind Microsoft's move.



THE NEW MINECRAFT COMBAT UPDATE IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE SINCE MICROSOFT BOUGHT MOJANG

From the makers of **games™**

ARCADE CLASSICS

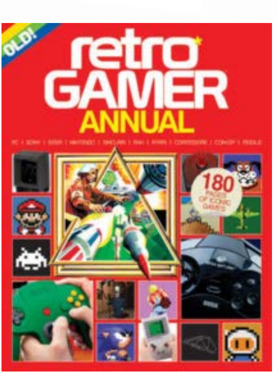
Our brand new book transports you back to the glory days of the arcade. Learn how the industry started, go behind the scenes of Pac-Man and Dragon's Lair and discover interviews with legendary developers such as Ed Logg, and Yu Suzuki.



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> A new dedicated handheld couldn't hope to penetrate the modern market

NX: Nintendo's Dreamcast?

With the 3DS reaching a plateau and Wii U lucky to get even a bronze medal out of this generation, it's plain to see that Nintendo currently stands at a crossroads with regards to its next hardware release – one route leads to a Wii-style success story, one to another generation of treading water and the last... well, folks round these parts call that one 'Sega Road'. Nintendo wouldn't nearly be the first major player to exit the home hardware market – Atari, SNK and Commodore all pulled out long before Dreamcast removed Sega from the equation, but I'm fairly sure that's not a situation Nintendo plans on dealing with.

The handheld market, however, is a different matter, yet one that the Japanese giant seems to have under control. Reports suggest that NX could be a hybrid platform that brings together the best of home and portable gaming, something that actually makes perfect sense when combined with its recent shift into mobile territory. A new dedicated handheld couldn't hope to penetrate a modern market where we're drowning in smartphones and tablets, but a unified solution may yet be able to find its niche.

The quality of Nintendo's first-party output has been largely responsible for keep three of its last four home consoles afloat (Wii didn't need the help – it already had a luxury liner built out of shovelware) and while some will happily take a close alternative to the real deal if it means not buying a new console, that's where this mobile powerplay really starts to make sense – by offering simplified versions of its classic franchises on mobile, Nintendo isn't eating into its own sales, rather those of its competitors.

The issue I'm struggling with right now, though, is whether there's even a place for that unification of handheld and console gaming. After all, that fusion was pretty much the entire design brief for Vita, an amazing platform but one likely to go down as Sony's worst-performing major gaming hardware release (PSP Go doesn't count). Like the Dreamcast, Nintendo's next console is simply going to come along at a horrible time – unless it has its own gimmick that can draw the public eye away from the VR boom going on this years, can deliver hardware that trumps console front-runner Sony and is able to offer games with the value to make them preferable to Nintendo's own mobile output, it could be doomed from the offset. And that's no easy checklist right there.

Of course, at this point we don't even know what NX is, or when it might happen. But the fact remains that cutting edge hardware has never been Nintendo's strong suit, while its last few shots at gimmicks have failed to recapture the magic of the DS or Wii. It's not going to be easy, but if anyone can do it...



Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and sincerely hopes Nintendo can find a way to remain relevant in the hardware business.

Import Watch

Star Ocean: Integrity And Faithlessness

Look past the fact that it has one of the worst titles of any major release in the last decade and there's hope to be found here – the PS4 isn't exactly swimming in quality JRPGs right now and the few we *do* have are remakes of the classics, meaning there's a title shot waiting for any solid entry that can beat *FFXV*, *Ni No Kuni 2* and *Persona 5* onto the shelves. Real-time combat (with character-switching), sprawling open planets to explore and an inevitably ludicrous spiralling sequence of narrative events should all conspire to make this one of the best original JRPGs on the system... for a while, at least.




DRAGON'S DOGMA: DARK ARISEN IS CAPCOM'S FASTEST SELLING PC GAME EVER, ACCORDING TO THE PUBLISHER



"As far as local multiplayer goes, it's one of the best games"
LUKE CRANE, HEAD OF GAMES, KICKSTARTER



WHY I ♥...

MARIO KART

LUKE CRANE,
HEAD OF GAMES, KICKSTARTER

I love the weird versions of Mario Kart*. I'm talking* Double Dash *and* Mario Kart Wii *– you know, with those wheel controllers – I really love those wheels. We actually, in fact, developed a joke because using that Wii controller would take a certain touch to get all the subtlety out of them. We were constantly complaining, people who did not have that touch, the 'Oh, my controller is broken' crowd.*

And so we started a letter writing campaign: "Dear Nintendo! I was playing Mario Kart *and...", so every time somebody would complain you'd write them a letter to Nintendo. I just love, love, love* Mario Kart*. As far as local multiplayer goes it's one of the best games – track design, character level design, everything. Ah, I could play it forever.*

Paragon

CONCEPT ■ Epic turns its hand to the MOBA with two teams of five heroes battling in classic three-lane valleys. Can it take on the established giants of the genre?

The first truly great console MOBA?

There's a general misconception, shared (and perhaps even accepted) by gamers, publishers and eSport enthusiasts alike, that the MOBA isn't designed to thrive on console. That isn't to say it hasn't been attempted before, or even that some titles haven't found a moderate amount of success in doing so – *Monday Night Combat* and *Guardians Of Middle Earth* were fine examples from the last generation, while *Smite* continues to steadily hold ground on Xbox One. But they weren't exactly pulling in *League Of Legends* numbers now, were they?

Then again, expecting anything to come close to replicating the localised lane thrills and hectic hero combat of Riot's decade defining triumph seems unrealistic at this stage in the game – it is to MOBAs what *World Of Warcraft* was to the MMO. But that doesn't mean there isn't space in the genre for new contenders. *DOTA 2* and *Heroes Of The Storm* have carved out their own niches on PC pretty successfully and, when it comes to console development, well, studios simply need to get smarter in the way they approach the genre, mechanics as well as the audience.

That's why *Paragon*, even at this incredibly early stage in development, seems like such a triumph for Epic Games. At a glance, *Paragon* looks like it's designed to be the MOBA for the *Gears Of War* generation – gently darting between conflicting genres without diluting either in the process. Its heroes are intricately designed war machines, powerhouse showcases to the power of *Unreal Engine 4*; *Paragon* shakes off the top-down camera, dragging the action down to a familiar third-person perspective; and the frantic action comes fast and furiously, though a waist-high cover shootout never arrives. Epic may have made a MOBA, but it doesn't play like any you've likely had in your hands before.

Though we should be clear, *Paragon* is unashamedly, fundamentally a MOBA at heart – not a hybrid like *Gearbox* is putting out there with *Battleborn*. It's important that you understand its similarities to the competition, so that you can appreciate what it is doing differently. It's a PvP game that puts five heroes against another five, with each team tasked with marching across a three-lane battlefield alongside minions in an attempt to destroy towers, inhibiters and, ultimately, an enemy base. There's a jungle to navigate and 13 heroes to choose between, each offering a unique set of abilities and Ultimates. A single match can last anywhere between 25 minutes and upwards of an hour, depending on the skill level of each team. This isn't an attempt to make the MOBA 'more accessible', 'more fun' or any of the other hollow corporate BS that so many have promised over the years. This is Epic simply trying to make the traditional MOBA experience work simultaneously on console and PC.

It's doing a pretty convincing job of it too. For Epic to make this work (*and* be fun) it has had to make a handful of fundamental changes to the traditional MOBA experience. The biggest sees the action shift from a top-down perspective to a closer, third-person POV. It's impossible to overstate how integral this is to *Paragon*'s appeal. While Smite opted to try and convert traditional mechanics into this POV, Epic has instead made *Paragon* handle more like a third-person shooter.

/// So not only do you need to keep an eye on your cooldowns and your position at all times, you also now need to make a reasonable effort to aim your attacks. Action seems faster, more intense, and more ferocious than that of a traditional MOBA, leaving each and every battle with rival heroes feeling like it's been ripped straight from the twitch stream of an all-important Worlds final encounter.

We opted to go into battle with a *DualShock 4* controller, fighting a mixture of mouse and keyboard wielding developers and other journalists taking the gamepad approach to lane management, and found little problems with the set up. Each hero has five abilities and each are mapped intuitively to the controller – response time seemed precise and we had little problem emerging victorious in battles versus multiple heroes. Epic seems confident



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Epic Games
Developer: In-House
Release: Q1 2016
Players: 1-10

Developer Profile

Founded in 1991, as Epic MegaGames, the studio would go on to develop titles such as *Jazz Jackrabbit* and *Overkill* before a name change turned it into Epic Games in 1999. From there a new focus was put on developing its Unreal Engine tech, which eventually led to the release of Xbox 360 market leader *Gears Of War*.

Developer History

Gears Of War **2006 [Xbox 360]**
Unreal Tournament 3 **2007 [Xbox 360, PS3, PC]**
Gears Of War 2 **2008 [Xbox 360]**
Gears Of War 3 **2011 [Xbox 360]**

High Point

Developed as a showcase of its stunning Unreal Engine 3 tech, Epic delivered the first truly spectacular Xbox 360 game in *Gears Of War*, a game that set the benchmark for third-person action.



THE BEST-LOOKING MOBA

YOU'VE NEVER SEEN a MOBA that looks quite like *Paragon*, and that's down to the incredible implementation of the Unreal Engine 4. If you've been waiting for Epic to showcase its new engine, look no further. The lanes are intricately detailed and the Jungle is dense and vibrant, it brings a whole new level of immersion to play. We were particularly impressed with the models of the heroes; each has their own unique style and design quirks, and should you be unfortunate enough to be within touching distance of an enemy you'll also notice an impressive array of particle and damage effects on show – and that's across both PlayStation 4 and PC. It's probably the closest a MOBA has come to actually looking like its CGI trailers yet.

"Paragon is the MOBA from Epic Games that puts you in the fight with explosive action, direct third-person control, and deep strategic choice"

PRESS RELEASE EPIC GAMES

that *Paragon* will support Cross-play at launch – between PS4 and PC owners – and, from what we've experienced at least, we don't imagine there's going to be a great deal of handicap offered by either alternative control method.

That third-person camera hasn't just changed the pace and flow of combat though, it's also given us a whole new perspective on the battleground itself. We only had the chance to sample a single map in *Paragon* so far but, as *League* players are no doubt aware, one is all you need. It's *giant*. Seriously, once you step foot out of your tower defended base, you will be able to look out upon this massive, sprawling tangle of lanes and jungle and it's impressive, if not a little bit intimidating.

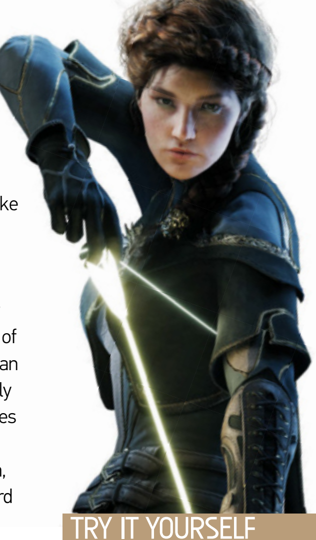
More impressive still, is that *Paragon* introduces verticality into its design. The depth and scale found here is completely unlike most top-down 2D plane MOBAs, and it means you not only need to be aware of what's in front of and behind you at times, but above and below you as well. We often found ourselves trying to manage forward momentum in the top lane, only to see the lane wiped by a well executed Ultimate strike from above by a ranged AOE hero.

With months still to go until open beta (let alone a full launch) we were surprised to see how well balanced the 13 heroes were. Every character type – filling the standardised roles of Tank, Carry, Support and Jungler, etc… – has an equal in battle, and success or failure is largely determined on how teams position themselves to meet each threat as it emerges.

If there is any one area for concern though, it centres on *Paragon*'s implementation of card deck system, instead of the traditional shop front. Rather than having an in-round shop that lets you purchase upgrades for your hero, you instead need to build a deck of cards that represent items and passive effects ahead of a game beginning.

Decks can be constructed from a pool of cards – of varying rarities, of course – that you unlock by playing and winning games. You can form multiple decks for each hero, designed around different tactical options and plays, and then select it before a game springs into action. In theory, it's wildly expansive. In reality, it seems suspiciously restrictive.

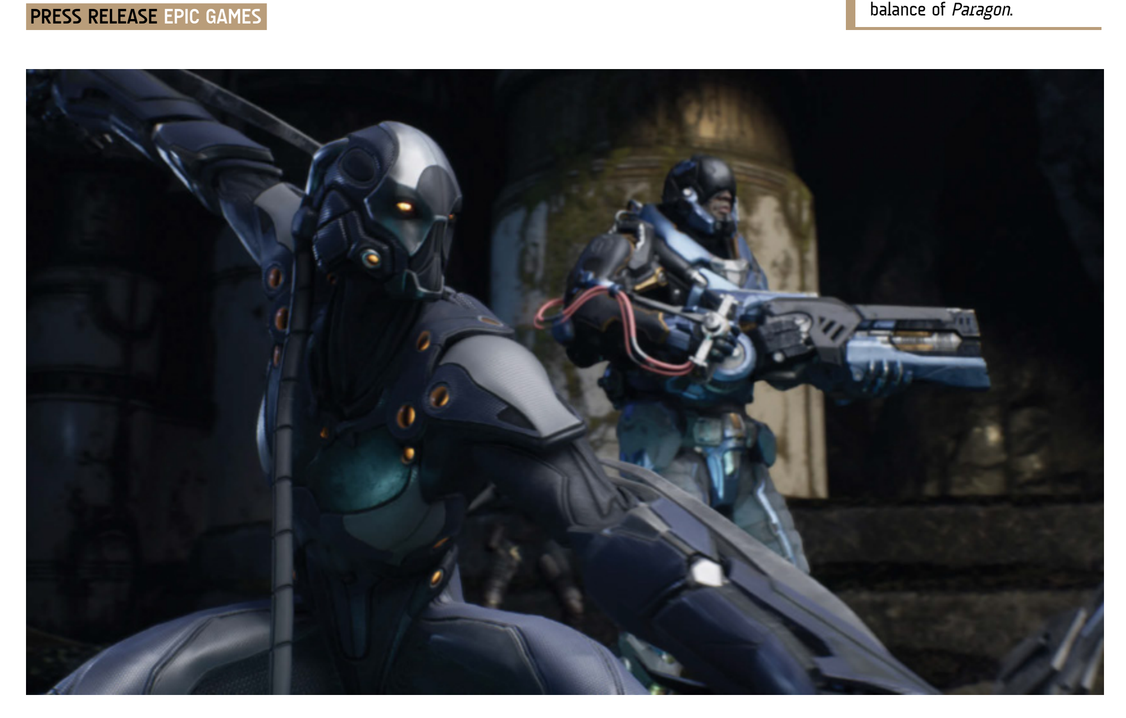
> "We really want gamers to be able to opt-in and be here with us from the start, to give feedback and help shape the game"
>
> PRESS RELEASE EPIC GAMES



TRY IT YOURSELF

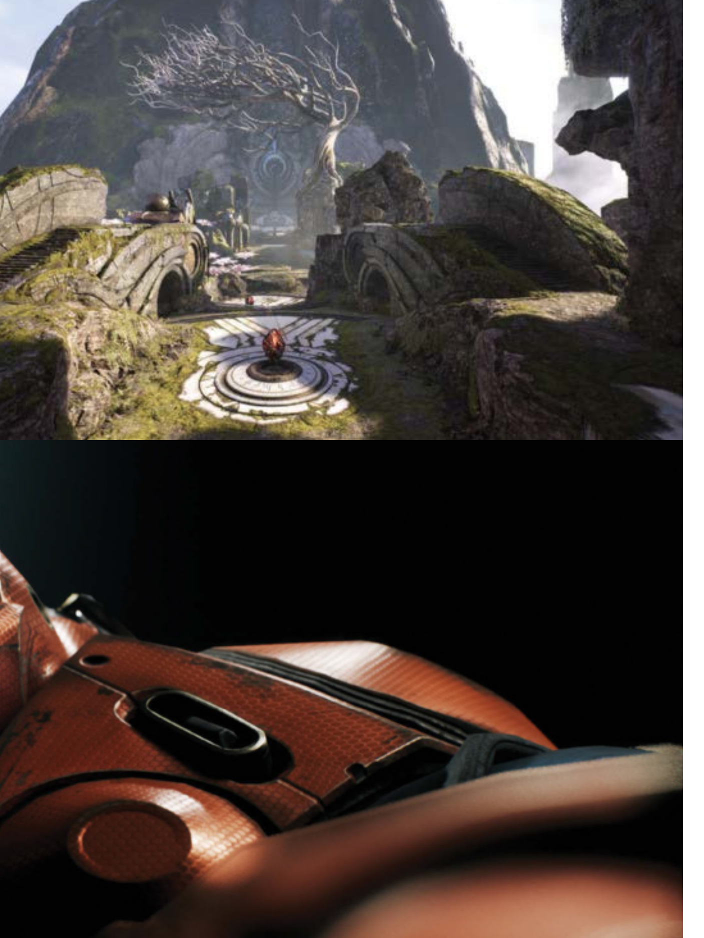
LIKE WITH ANY MOBA, playing it for yourself is key. *Paragon* is currently in closed beta on PS4 and PC, with invites steadily going out to those that have signed up. It's here where hero balancing and card management will really be trialed by fire by the community before the official launch in late 2016. An open beta is planned for the summer though it sounds as if Epic is only more than happy to delay these public tests to ensure the game is up to scratch. Regardless of when it goes live, we can only hope cross-play becomes part of these betas before long, as this could have drastic implications on the overall balance of *Paragon*.

Above: Combat is incredibly involving, and Epic has walked a tight line between making it as tactical as that of a traditional MOBA and as visually stimulating as a battle you might find in one of its triple-A third-person shooters. Right: CGI trailers for the game have been created in-engine, which means they do actually give a fairly accurate representation of what to expect. Below: Epic isn't talking too much about its monetisation plans just yet, though the studio has confirmed that its card packs will not be part of it. That means we can likely expect to see hero cosmetic items and the like cost supplementary cash.



Above: Thanks to the implementation of the *Unreal Engine 4*, *Paragon* looks absolutely stunning. The lanes are expansive and vast, and full of verticality; delivering a whole new breadth of tactical opportunities.





This system seems to demand that all players, regardless of skill level, have a relatively strong mechanical understanding of MOBAs *and* all 13 heroes. If the idea is to build decks to support certain roles and combat certain characters, this will be lost on a new or even intermediate player. In *Paragon*, like every MOBA, dying can have dire consequences on the flow of a game – it doesn't feel great to be underpowered for the better part of an hour because you've picked out (and locked into) the wrong card deck ahead of a game.

Still, there is a lot of scope for advanced players to really build some interesting configurations. Each card's item or upgrade comes with its own specific cost – the more powerful the effect, the more expensive it is. That means you'll need to build a deck that has a progressive cost curve – not unlike building a competitive deck in Hearthstone. This deck system clearly has the potential to bring a new tactical element to MOBAs; some cards can be upgraded and enhanced in game by placing additional cards in 'sockets', further increasing your potency in battle.

/// It's an interesting idea, and certainly brings a new tactical element to the traditional MOBA progression system. You will have the option of planning upgrades depending on how you want to play, though it all hinges on the cards you have available to you. You may want to go all out offensive, boosting your damage and lowering your cooldowns. Perhaps you want to opt for higher health and manna pools in an effort to become more defensive; or go all-rounded to better suit team support and Jungle roles. Epic has already confirmed that, thankfully, card packs can not be purchased with real cash –monitization elements will be present, though they are still yet to be confirmed – but this also means that players with more time to play will only be able to further their advantage over others.

Ultimately, *Paragon* is already looking like a really strong alternative to the other MOBA games on the market. It does a great job of making players feel like they are part of the action – it has all of the traditional elements of the MOBA, but it combines them effortlessly with the ferocity of a third-person shooter. Aiming and spell timing is critical to success, and it's deeply satisfying to pull of tricky crowd management manoeuvres and multiple hero kills as a result. Positional play is key too, which only goes to make *Paragon* feel immensely immersive. The biggest questions now are whether the card system can be appropriately balanced, and whether the reality of cross platform play will impact the competitive side to the game – but in terms of gameplay? Whether you're running down other heroes, battling alongside minions or circle strafing NPCs in the Jungle, *Paragon* gives a fantastic amount of control over your character – it only serves to make the upcoming title one of the most intricate, enjoyable and involved MOBAs we've ever had the pleasure of playing.

The environment we're shown is from early in the game, and restricted for the demo. But what Cyanide has crammed into it – beams to shimmy, ropes to climb, ziplines to… er, zip – makes *Shards of Darkness* feel like a playground. In which children murder each other.



MAKING A MURDERER

THE DEVELOPER WAS keen to stress that Styx isn't much of a fighter – you're not supposed to be wrecking Elven cities like a child moodily smashing up a *Lord Of The Rings* LEGO set. Which was at odds with the massacre we witnessed in our demo. One guy got tipped over a ledge, another got jumped on and shanked in the back. But the real high point of this Tolkien-esque *Poirot* episode was when two guards were lured underneath the same heavy wooden chandelier, the supporting rope for which then mysteriously snapped, crushing them both to death and presumably leaving bereaved families to weep over their lost loved ones.



Above: We're only shown the one environment, but aside from towns on stilts, Styx will also be rifling through Dwarven and Elven settlements, as well as airships. **Right:** Styx has goblin magic to help him in his thieving, like creating a clone of himself to send in his stead when things get a bit tasty.

Styx: Shards of Darkness

CONCEPT ■ A larcenous goblin breaks, climbs and swings into buildings to pilfer their contents and stab up their owners, then escapes via rope/zipline/more stabbing up

Lock up your daughters. And sons. And silverware

You know something's gone wrong when you start feeling sorry for the guards. As we watch Styx, the skulking thief goblin, skulk and thieve and goblin about the small outpost of the demo, the guards dawdle about like a pensioner who knows they came into the room for something, but can't quite remember what. Some of them – a lot, really, when you remember what their job is – are asleep. The rest wander over to a table, stop, turn around, wander to the centre of the room, stop, then head over to a different table and stop. Then Styx cuts the cord holding up the chandelier over their heads and smashes them into the floor in a cloud of dust. It's like watching a grim reaper on commission making his way round an old folks' home.

But let's pretend for our purposes that these are evil pensioners. Tesco-vouchers-at-Christmas-type pensioners. Because once you stop feeling sorry for them, *Styx: Shards of Darkness* looks quite fun. You creep about next to low walls, nabbing odd bits of loot that the dearies have left lying about in boxes or behind locked doors, and then once two of them have bumbled off in different directions, you tip one over a precipice and drag the other one into a cupboard for a covert clobbering.

It's all a bit *Assassin's Creed* meets *Thief*, the life of this larcenous goblin acrobat. In the demo level we see, you're encouraged to scout out the on-stilts buildings to find one of multiple entry points (rather than just barging in the door, which rouses the guard from their respective slumbers and aimless wanderings). You can jump up to the exposed wooden beams outside, shimmying along ledges and clambering up onto the roof until you find a crawl space to wiggle through, or you can dangle underneath the floor, swinging back and forth on ropes until you discover one that leads up to an open window. There's shades of *Dishonored* in there, too, as you conceal yourself (not well, but well enough for the AI) under tables staring out patiently at people's knees and peering through keyholes to gauge the ratio of guards to cupboards in the next room.

/// And like *Dishonored* (and also because you're a goblin) there are of course magic powers to play around with, powered by the in-game resource, Amber. In the demo we're shown, the example we're given is Styx's cloning ability: toss out a cocoon and almost instantly a fully-grown Styx-llgagner bursts out of it, of which you then take control and send off to scout or perform riskier feats of thievery. Cleverly, you can also lob the cocoon to areas that Styx otherwise can't reach, birthing your dearest clone on top of high roofs, for example, to clear the way for the true Styx patiently waiting in front of a locked door.

> "The environments of Styx: Shards of Darkness are enormous and semi-open, with an emphasis on verticality"
>
> PRESS RELEASE, CYANIDE

What we see is quite limited – just the one level from early on in the story (we're told little beyond 'you're a thief, go rob people'). But developers Cyanide promise that far from outwitting mere humans, you'll also be travelling to different environments run by Dwarves and Dark Elves – and robbing them blind, too. The races will have their own distinct behaviours, designed to shake up your playing style and forcing Styx to adopt new strategies. Dwarves, for instance, have mighty big noses and a correspondingly mighty sense of smell, which they'll employ to root out Styx like a delicious sticky-fingered truffle.

Which means, in the end, that the really interesting parts of *Styx* are the parts we've not seen yet. The idea is there, the mechanics are there, but ultimately you're not really a master thief if your victims have left all the doors open and obligingly fall asleep the moment they're done arranging the family heirlooms. Give the NPCs a few espressos and a purpose beyond wearing circuitous paths into the carpets, and *Shards of Darkness* could be a decent step up from it predecessor.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: France
Publisher: Focus Interactive
Developer: Cyanide
Release: TBC 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

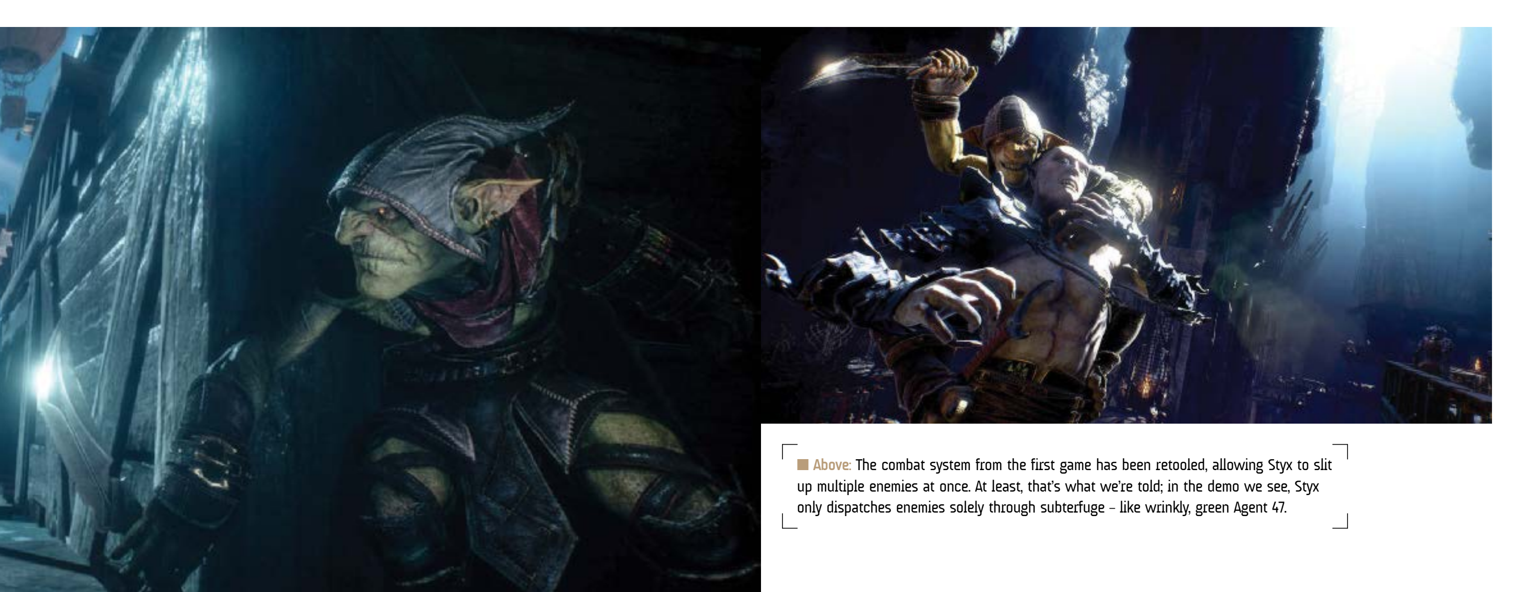
Besides developing *Shards of Darkness*' forebear, *Styx: Master of Shadows* (2014), Cyanide is also responsible for the upcoming *Space Hulk: Deathwing* (see page 26), 2012's *Game Of Thrones* RPG and more than a half dozen games about cycling. No, really.

Developer History

Styx: Master of Shadows **2014 [Multi]**
Of Orcs and Men **2012 [Multi]**
Blood Bowl II **2015 [Multi]**

High Point

Cyanide is the studio that was trusted to adapt Games Workshop's lesser-known *Blood Bowl* series. It's like the Super Bowl, but with Orcs. And, you know, more blood.



■ Above: The combat system from the first game has been retooled, allowing Styx to slit up multiple enemies at once. At least, that's what we're told; in the demo we see, Styx only dispatches enemies solely through subterfuge – like wrinkly, green Agent 47.

Total War: Warhammer

CONCEPT ■ A seemingly perfect fit: the oh-so-British *Warhammer* mixed in with the just-as-British *Total War* series. Magic and fantasy make for new challenges, but generally this is Total War as you know it

WAAAGH, what is it good for?

In some ways it feels the most obvious combination ever heard of – *Total War*, a series that takes tabletop gaming's inspiration and has run with it for the better part of two decades, combined with *Warhammer*, one of the games that defined tabletop gaming. But in others, it doesn't seem to fit: *Total War* has always covered the real world, while *Warhammer* is the most fantasy of fantasy universes… and yet, it's all coming together rather well.

Ian Roxborough, project lead on *Total War: Warhammer*, told us the jump to fantasy was a natural one: "Ultimately, for a number of years we've been toying with the idea of doing a fantasy game anyway," he said, "This was a real opportunity to just jump into a really awesome pre-existing universe and make a game that appeals to everyone – because it can. It's still very much at its heart a *Total War* game, but rather than taking history we take the *Warhammer* universe."

Andy Hall, writer at Creative Assembly – and former Games Workshop scribe – explained why the idea is such a compelling one: "If you are a *Total War* fan, why wouldn't you be interested in how giants interact? How you use spells in a real-time battle? All the geo-political campaign issues? These different races, with different value sets to what humans have – obviously the Empire is very much what we want: a stable realm, to tax the populace, to keep them safe. But even that is set within this magical world of wizards and so on. But with Orks where it's focused on fighting… all these different value sets create different kinds of inertia for the campaign. It's a very intriguing concept to play."

This intriguing concept, as Hall calls it, is one that has been fully supported on both sides of the fence, with the team's ideas supported 100 per cent by Games Workshop. "It's been great," Roxborough said, "A load of people at Workshop are fans of *Total War* and now they're like 'oh wow, that's our thing now in *Total War*!' All the while we're going 'wow, it's *Total War* with *Warhammer*!' Both companies are also quite similar, both staffed by people who are passionate about the products, rather than anything else – we passionately live what we do and feel very proud of it and put everything into it."

The game itself is *Total War* as you know it, but also as you don't. While series veterans will be right in there, picking up some of the newer concepts immediately (dark magic is just the Vampires' currency, for example), there are a fair few bigger twists and turns to come to grips with. As Roxborough said: "We're effectively creating four different *Total War* games, one different one for each race. It's not just the new features, but that those features genuinely drive the way you play, the way you balance the economy, how building and tech trees work, it's very much about driving that. Playing as the Vampires has its own distinct flavour, then playing as the Greenskins is a whole different ball game, likewise Empire and Dwarfs."

There are also elements like diplomacy, *Warhammer*-style. Some races just don't get on – this is baked in to the game from the beginning of any campaign – the Empire and Greenskins don't see eye to eye… but that can change; it is sandbox after all. It's another balancing act – getting the accuracy while also maintaining the freedom for players to do as they wish.

> "It's for Total War fans, it's for Warhammer fans, it's for people who haven't really come across Total War before"
>
> ANDY HALL, WRITER, CREATIVE ASSEMBLY

It's that *newness* that Creative Assembly is hoping will engage returning players, while also luring in those who have never played the series before – and, of course, the dedicated *Warhammer* fanbase. With the basic formula now 16 years old and still being refined with every new release, there's little chance the core concept of *Total War: Warhammer* will be a failure. It's how the balance is handled that will be key – and Creative Assembly's dedication to getting this right makes it look like things could well be heading in completely the right direction: all-out WAAAAGH!

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Creative Assembly
Release: 24 May
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Formed in 1987, Creative Assembly spent its formative years mainly working on ports of games to DOS. By 2000 it had created the first *Total War* game, *Shogun*, and since then – while not a one-series studio by any means – has mainly been known for its work on the strategy franchise.

Developer History

Total War: Attila **2015 [PC]**
Alien: Isolation **2014 [PC, PS4, Xbox One]**
Empire: Total War **2009 [PC]**
Shogun: Total War **2000 [PC]**

High Point

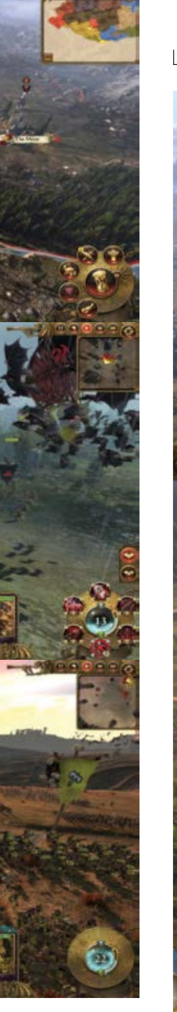
While the *Total War* series has been consistently great (bar the odd misstep), *Alien: Isolation* showed Creative Assembly is more than just a strategy developer. Original, terrifying and brilliant.





■ Above: New strategies involve new units, like those which can fly or wield magic. It's a learning curve, but we found it easy to get to grips with.

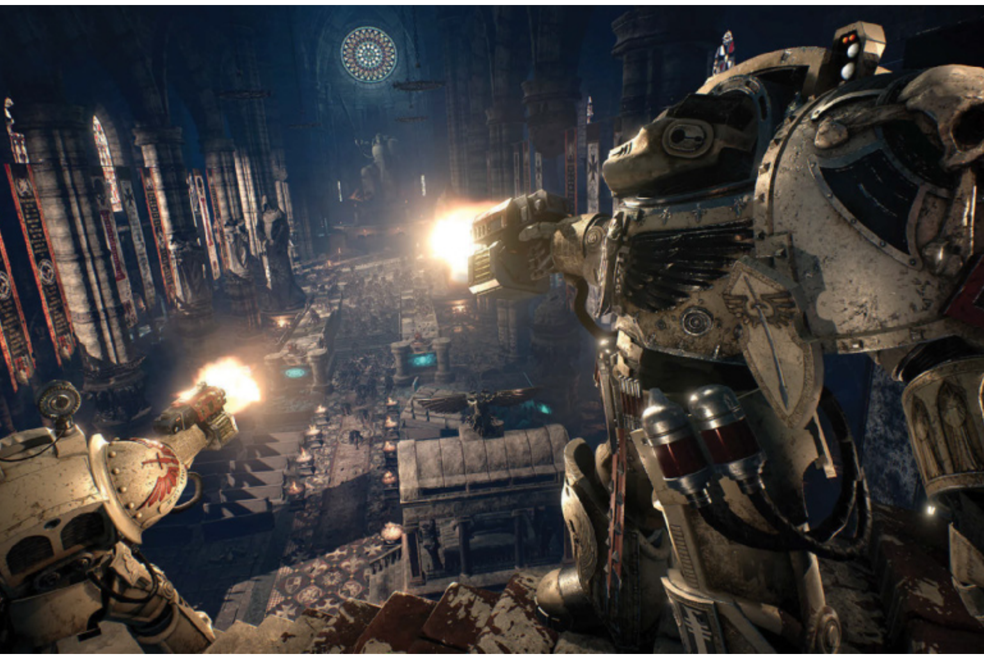




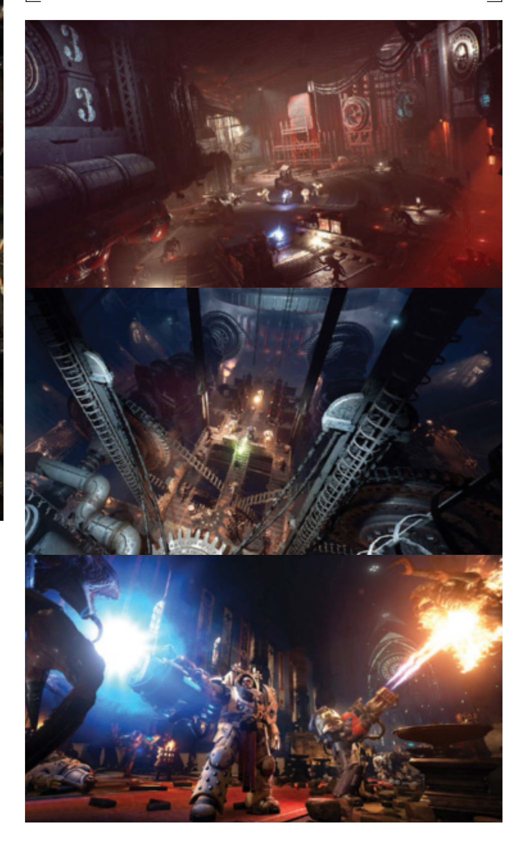
■ Above: The battlefield is familiar to anyone who's dabbled in *Total War*, but the way things are approached differs from race to race. The lack of ranged units for Vampires, for example, makes adaptation necessary to succeed. Below: There's enough information to fill in the casual players. You certainly don't have to be an expert on all things Ork to understand what's going on, but the deeper lore is there for diehard fans.

AS YOU GO ALONG

Andy Hall, writer on *Total War: Warhammer*, previously worked at Games Workshop – but even he is finding new and interesting things coming about as a result of working on the game: "For me, the interesting thing was covering parts of the IP that Games Workshop has never had to cover before, or never needed to," he said, "What does Manfred von Carstein sound like? Even doing some stuff like the buildings – *Total War* by its very nature needs buildings that Games Workshop has never needed, like a Goblin sawmill. How does that work in the *Warhammer* world? So I get paid to write about Snotlings running on the conveyor belt, which is cool!"



■ Left: Even what may look like a peaceful cathedral isn't safe in this war-ridden future world. The dark wrecks of spaceships that you explore in this gloomy game are sure to keep you on the edge of your seat. Below: You can enjoy a huge variety weapons to play around with, but you must do so while looking like a Victorian deep sea diver.



Space Hulk: Deathwing

CONCEPT ■ A woefully small squad of heavily armoured space marines clomp and squish their way through derelict spaceships and alien monsters (respectively) in search of loot and audiologs

Purging the scum of the universe

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: France
Publisher: Focus Interactive
Developer: Streum on Studio / Cyanide
Release: TBC 2016
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

French devs Streum On Studio were responsible for the deliciously left-field first-person magic shooter *E.Y.E. Divine Cybermancy* – as weird to play as it is to try and pronounce. Cyanide, meanwhile, are the creators of *Styx: Master of Shadows* and the upcoming *Styx: Shards of Darkness* (see page 22).

Developer History

Styx: Master of Shadows **2014 [PC, PS4, Xbox One]**
Game of Thrones **2012 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]**
Of Orcs and Men **2012 [PC, PS3, Xbox 360]**
E.Y.E. Divine Cybermancy **2011 [PC]**

In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war. Well, that's not quite true. There are also a lot of locked and lockable doors. This is a major coup for people living in far future, as war has no idea what to do about locked doors. With a big enough cupboard and a sturdy padlock, we could probably do away with war altogether. But then Games Workshop would have to change the tagline for *Warhammer 40,000* to 'in the safe and secure utopia of the far future, nothing is wrong but don't open the cupboard'. Which would be rubbish.

'War' in this analogy means aliens, specifically the ones that are hunting you and your squad of heavily armoured Deathwing Terminators (think of a massive fridge, but with machine guns and space hammers instead of a vegetable drawer) through the titular Space Hulks. For the glory of far future Imperium of Man, you and your squadmates are tasked with raiding these gargantuan derelict ships for Relics and uncovering a dark truth (everything in the future is dark) about the history of the *Deathwing* and its associated chapter of Space Marines, the Dark (see?) Angels.

At least, that's the reason we're given as we watch the three Deathwing squad members stomp around the wreck of a gloomy spaceship, cutting their way through swarms of shrieking monsters. The toothier inhabitants of this particular derelict are Genestealers – fast, bipedal xenomorphs about the size of a man that scamper along the ship's tight corridors or clamber up onto gangways to go at the squad with indecently large claws.

In the pre-release footage we see, they're absolutely no match for the Terminators, who have everything from the Warhammer 40K arsenal to swat them away with, from Assault Cannons to Heavy Flamers to Lightning Claws. Unfortunately, they're also (though hopefully only in this early stage of development) quite dim – preferring to charge noisily in straight lines with howling faces positioned conveniently at bullet-level. Less Ridley Scott, more Rick and Morty.

And we say hopefully because at the centre of *Space Hulk*, there's quite a cool mechanic: those lockable doors we mentioned. While in the demo the Terminators had all their weapons unlocked, in the game proper there will reportedly be a real risk of getting swarmed. The way to counter this is to look at your in-game map, make note of how the corridors connect and which doors you can seal off, then strategically funnel the tide of teeth and chitin into areas where you can more efficiently mulch them. Think of the turret set-up scenes in *Aliens* laid on top of *Doom*, and you're somewhere in the ballpark. That's the level of action and chaos against a dark and dank backdrop *Space Hulk* is aiming for and so far, it's impressive.

> "Space Hulk: Deathwing offers players the chance to experience a desperate battle against Genestealers in the claustrophobic tunnels of a Space Hulk"
> PRESS RELEASE, FOCUS HOME STUDIOS


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TMNT: Mutants In Manhattan

CONCEPT The team behind *Bayonetta*, *Vanquish* and *Transformers: Devastation* brings its slick combat expertise to the world of the *Turtles*

Heroes in a half shell go Platinum

It's been a staggering 14 years since we last had a really great *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game in the form of Turtles In Time, and every half-baked effort since has paled in comparison. Enter Platinum Games - it of *Bayonetta* and *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* fame - to turn our green-skinned, pizza-swilling dreams into a bona fide reality.

Fresh off its reinvigoration of the previously deceased *Transformers* franchise with last year's *Devastation*, Platinum is giving the Heroes in a Half-Shell the ass-kicking entry they truly deserve. Much like *Devastation*, *Mutants in Manhattan* will wisely ignore all terrible movies (and not so terrible Nickelodeon show) in favour of its classic comic routes.

That means ultraviolence on a combo-tastic scale only Platinum could manage. Expect to take on Shredder's nefarious Foot Clan with everything from awesome double-team moves to time-bending special attacks (one of Leonardo's attacks turns everything black and white, just like the original '80s comic). Cowabunga, indeed.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4. Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Platinum Games
Release: Summer 2016
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

With veteran developers Shinji Mikami, Hideki Kamiya and Atsushi Inaba as its founders, Platinum Games has become one of the premiere multiformat studios in Japan. Specialising in stylised visuals and sharp combat, Platinum is as comfortable working on new IPs as it is reinvigorating old ones.

Developer History

Bayonetta, **2009 [Multi]**
Vanquish, **2010 [Multi]**
MGR: Revengeance, **2013 [Multi]**
Transformers: Devastation, **2015 [Multi]**

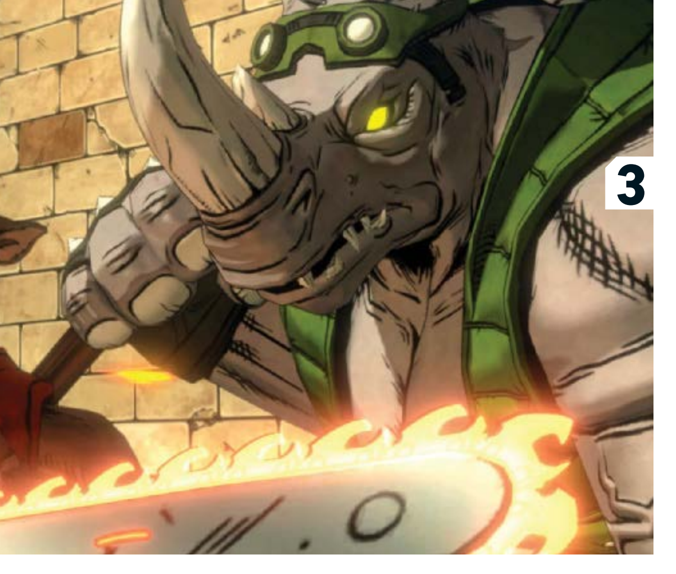
High Point

After garnering plenty of critical acclaim with 2009's exquisite *Bayonetta*, Platinum finally returned to the franchise in 2014 and produced its slickest and most rewarding experience to date in *Bayonetta 2*.

1 COMIC BOOK STYLINGS

TMNT VETERANS, you can breathe a sigh of relief - this new *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* game won't be tying into Michael Bay-orchestrated film reboot territory. Instead, we're treated to a cel-shaded-esque comic book style that's a mix between the classic TV show, Tsutomu Oyamada's manga series and the current run on IDW Publishing. In fact, Platinum even cited Brazilian artist and penciller on IDW's version Mateus Santolouco as an inspiration.

Dialing back the clock to those '80s and '90s inspirations worked a treat for *Transformers: Devastation* and it's already given *Mutants In Manhattan* an instantly authentic feel. The addition of current IDW co-writer Tom Waltz on story duties probably won't hurt either.







"Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutants In Manhattan is the game that the fanatics have been salivating for."
ROBERT COOPER, PLATINUM GAMES

2 TURTLE TEAMWORK

UNLIKE THE utterly forgettable tie-in game to the surprisingly decent 2007 TMNT movie, *Mutants In Manhattan* will be a proper co-operative experience. Up to four players will be able to pick their poison from Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo, with each character offering a different playstyle that will riff off their personality and choice of weapons.

Those fighting styles complement one another, so if you're playing in an online session you'll need to choose your half-shell teammates carefully. Platinum wants this to be the kind of game where communication and collaboration are just as important as solo hijinks so best start working on that online etiquette.

3 FAMILIAR FACES

NO *TEENAGE Mutant Ninja Turtles* game would be complete without a rogues gallery of… well, *rogues*. Alongside chums April O'Neil and rodent-turned-sensei Splinter, the Turtles will face off against plenty of unfriendly foes. Bebop and Rocksteady, complete with token gillets and questionable eyewear, are back and as roided-up as ever, while long-time blade fetishist Shredder returns with the entire Foot Clan at his disposable.

There were no signs of hockey enthusiast Casey Jones or evil genius Krang, but we wouldn't be surprised if they make an appearance. Oh, and a certain giant mutant shark seems to have joined the party. We wonder who that could be…

4 BOSSES REQUIRE COOPERATION

EVERY PLATINUM Games offering needs a giant boss or two, and *TMNT: Mutants In Manhattan* is planning to tick that box in true, mutated style. The Japanese studio is staying tightlipped on the full list of big bads, but we do know mutant shark monster Armaggon (first introduced in the old Archie comics) will be making his first videogame appearance since *TMNT: Tournament Fighters* on the SNES.

Much like everything else in the game, Platinum tells us these bosses will need just as much cooperation to take down. We're not expecting *Bloodborne* levels of difficulty, but knowing the developer they should still be devilishly challenging.

5 CUSTOMISABLE FIGHTING STYLES

DONNY, RAPH, Mikey and Leo aren't just a bunch of contrasting personalities - they're four very different fighting styles and weapon choices. And it's here we see the Platinum touch shine. For instance, stoic leader Leonardo's twin katanas make him an all-rounder with his medium reach and respectable speed, and while Michelangelo's nunchucks might have a small strike zone, he's easily the fastest.

Raphael is the slowest Turt, but he's the powerhouse of heavy strikes And as for Donny? Well, that staff has some serious ranged reach. Best of all, each one is customisable, enabling you to build your hero of choice the more you play.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

BLOOD ALLOY: REBORN

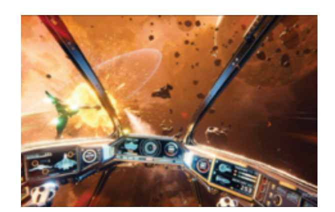
Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC, Mac, Wii U
Publisher: Suppressive Fire
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



INSPIRED BY *Metroid* and *Dark Souls*, *Blood Alloy: Reborn* is the product of a failed Kickstarter campaign that inspired the developer, Suppressive Fire, to go back to the drawing board. The current iteration has been boiled down to its purest form with reworked art and design, and with a much smaller scale game in the works compared to original concept the team is promising a finished product by the time 2016 comes to a close.

EVERSPACE

Format: PC, Xbox One
Publisher: Rockfish Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: October 2016



BILLED AS a single player 3D space shooter with rogue-like elements and a non-linear narrative, *Everspace* hails from the team behind the *Galaxy on Fire* series. The project – nearing half a million euro on Kickstarter – boasts a raft of features including VR support and plush visuals courtesy of Epic's Unreal Engine 4. Rockfish announced a partnership with ID@Xbox to bring the game to Microsoft's platform, so expect details on a release date soon.

PROJECT ELEA

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher: Kyodai
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



PROJECT ELEA has caught attention with a flashy trailer showing the story of a woman who wakes up in a locked cabin on-board the Worldtree-class starship Pilgrimage II in deep space. Players will need to battle an invasive intelligence to save the ship and uncover the truth behind what happened to the Pilgrimage and its crew. Pegged for release on multiple platforms later in the year, *Project Elea* is worth keeping a close eye on.

GRAND KINGDOM

Format: PS4, PS Vita
Publisher: MonoChro
Developer: Spike Chunsoft
ETA: 21 June 2016



GRAND KINGDOM, a tactical RPG that launched in Japan back in November, arrives on UK shores at the end of June. Sporting fast-paced action and strategic planning, as well as a meaty character creation system and customisation options, *Grand Kingdom* will release in a special limited edition that features a 128-page art book, poster, soundtrack and transparent decals. No price as of yet, but we don't expect it to be cheap so start saving.

THE CULLING

Format: PC
Publisher: Xaviant Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Steam Early Access



PICTURE YOURSELF on a remote island with 16 people. Now you have 20 minutes to explore, craft weapons before slaying your island brethren. That's the premise of this *Battle Royale* inspired first-person slaughter-fest from Xaviant Games on Steam Early Access. *The Culling* is a standalone experience featuring a variety of modes that we're going to be keeping a close eye on over the coming months.

GODUS WARS

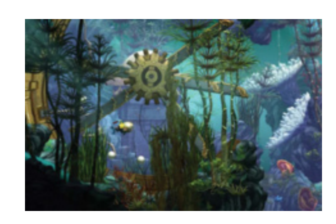
Format: PC
Publisher: 22cans
Developer: In-house
ETA: Steam Early Access



GODUS WARS is a real-time strategy title that serves as a precursor to the long-troubled release, *Godus*. Brandishing four deities, each with different styles, *Godus Wars* originally included micro transactions that were shelved after disgruntled gamers complained. Whether or not this will help improve the mostly negative reviews remains to be seen. As for *Godus* itself, its release date still remains a mystery.

SONG OF THE DEEP

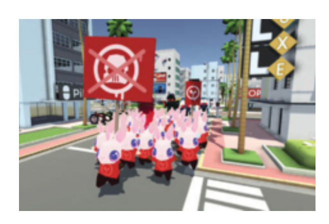
Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher: Insomniac Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q2 2016



SONG OF the Deep is developer Insomniac Games' answer to the metroidvania genre, a colourful and charming side-scrolling adventure that casts you as Merryn, a young girl on a journey to find her father, a fisherman lost at sea. The nippy narrative is strengthened by a vast underwater world made up of sunken cities, weird creatures and tricky puzzles. We can't wait to get our hands on it.

ANARCUTE

Format: PC, Xbox One
Publisher: Anarteam
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016

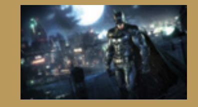


ANARCUTE IS a cuddly riot simulator that tasks you with controlling dozens of demonstrators determined to relieve the world of the numerous evil corporations that have a stranglehold over it. In order to do this the rioters band together and wreak havoc on various cities controlled by the corporations all while wearing goofy animal heads. The challenge is to avoid getting your rioters nabbed by the cops. Colour us curious for this one.



CANCELLED – Fable Legends

"To be honest, we didn't anticipate just how big *Fable Legends* is becoming." So said Lionhead just a few weeks before the announcement that the game was being cancelled and the studio closed. It's been a bit of a surprise.

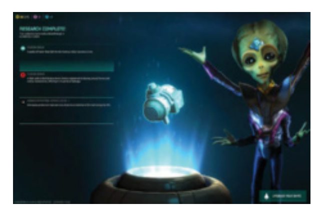


CANCELLED – Batman: Arkham Knight (OSX)

No surprise here given what a train wreck the PC launch was. Warner Bros. has now pulled the plug on the Mac and Linux versions of Rocksteady's final *Dark Knight* outing.

MASTERS OF ORION

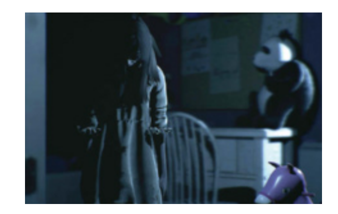
Format: PC
Publisher: WG Labs
Developer: NGD Studios
ETA: Q4 2016



MASTERS OF Orion is a reboot of the 1993 classic strategy title that NGD Studios are currently beavering away on for release later in the year. NGD doesn't plan to change much, rather take the original's solid formula and enhance it with modern graphics and a swish new orchestral soundtrack. The robot newscasters and combat look a little stilted, but there's still time for improvement, so here's hoping NGD can make the fixes before year's end.

VISAGE

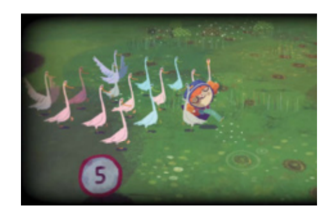
Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Publisher: Sad Square Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: January 2017



HEAVILY INSPIRED by the short-lived *P.T. Visage* is developer Sad Square's ode to the haunted house genre and games like *Silent Hill*. Plonked inside an old house during the 1980s you're thrust into a spooky scenario and tasked with exploring gloomy corridors and abandoned rooms. The game was funded pretty quickly on Kickstarter and has since surpassed a number of stretch goals, including a multi platform release on both PC and consoles.

KNIGHTS AND BIKES

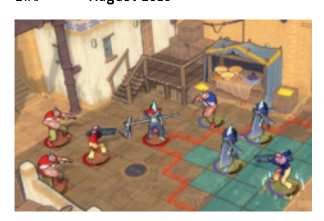
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: US
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016



KNIGHTS AND Bikes is a charming open-worlder on an island near Cornwall in the eighties that, according to its two former Media Molecule developers, riffs on the likes of *The Goonies* and *Earthbound*. It's on Kickstarter seeking funds, but we don't expect it to have any problems because, well, just look at how good it looks. That said, if you have a few quid to spare and want to see this one released, head over and get donating.

CITY OF THE SHROUD

Format: PC
Publisher: Abyssal Arts
Developer: In-house
ETA: August 2016



CITY OF the Shroud is a tactical fighting RPG that combines real-time fighting systems with team-based tactics, managed through a nifty combat wheel. One of the most interesting aspects of this one is that the narrative will be community driven rather than set in stone. Writer Moira Katson plans to pen each chapter of the episodic release by charting the cumulative actions of players, which should make for some interesting results.

INVISIGUN HEROES

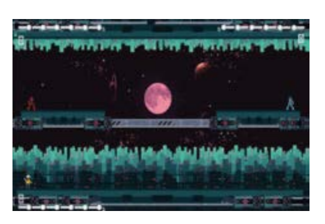
Format: PC
Publisher: Sombr Studio
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



INVISIGUN HEROES is a weird one and we're not sure how it will work, but we're intrigued at the very least. The game takes its cues from *Bomberman*, but the twist is that, by default, players are invisible until they fire their weapon, which means you'll basically have to rely on hearing, memory and your character's special abilities to trump your opponents. Do you think it stands a chance? Answers on a postcard, please.

SPACE REVOLVER

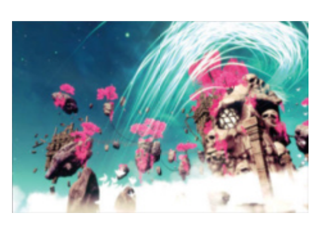
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Moonfall Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q3 2016



INSPIRED BY *Towerfall* and *Samurai Gunn* with gameplay ripped from the likes of Capcom's *Megaman X* and set in a world that owes its fair share of debt to *Cowboy Bebop*, *Space Revolver* is a quirky little looker that's being sold as a "shoot your own adventure" title. What does that mean? Apparently in the game's story mode you can pull a gun on anyone at any point during a conversation and whack 'em. Sold.

ESSENCE

Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: Onevision
Developer: In-house
ETA: October 2016



BILLED AS a "surreal first person exploration adventure", *Essence* looks hugely ambitious and equally gorgeous. The goal is uncovering the many mysteries in this strange world. Onevision is promising puzzles and special abilities as well as numerous stretch goals on its Kickstarter, including console and VR support. With five core worlds to explore, be sure to look out for this one in October.

NEED TO KNOW

Format: PC
Publisher: Monomyth Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: December 2016



IT'S NO surprise that someone has decided to capitalise on the shadowy world of the modern intelligence agency. Set in the Department of Liberty, developer Monomyth is calling *Need To Know* a surveillance thriller that will push your integrity to the limits, and it looks kind of slick. With the promise of a gripping tale that charts real character progression we're eager to sample this one.

ONE GIANT

LEAP

NO MAN'S SKY IS THE GAME WE'VE ALL BEEN WAITING TO SEE UP CLOSE. FINALLY, GAMES™ HAS BEEN GIVEN THE CHANCE TO PLAY IT AT LENGTH AND SPEAK WITH THE TEAM BEHIND IT



STARTED WITH FOUR GUYS AND A SMALL ROOM WITH WALLS COVERED IN SCI-FI BOOK COVERS. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, it started out as a bit of a joke. "We had this thing that we called *Project Skyscraper*, which we always had on our website under 'Games that we make', explains Sean Murray, Hello Games managing director as we chat about the formative days of *No Man's Sky*. "The other game that we make in the description said 'Secret Project: The most ambitious game ever made'. And it was this nice little joke that we had going on amongst ourselves. 'We could do this or this and this is how it would be built' and so on."

'The most ambitious game ever made.' That's an apt way to describe what we're now sitting in front of, with its 18 quintillion possible planets. *No Man's Sky* is ambitious in its scale; ambitious for an indie team of around 16 developers (the days of Hello Games being just four people ended during the development of *Joe Danger*, much as some continue to share that number); ambitious in its use of technology; ambitious in the variety of gameplay it's offering, something that's been somewhat unclear until this moment.

Clearly, the idea of making something hugely ambitious stuck in the minds of the Hello Games team, even if it hadn't been intended as something to follow through. Given that *Joe Danger* had been born from the original four founders of the team playing around with some old toys and being drawn to an Evel Knievel doll, we wondered what process had spawned such a gargantuan new project. "We took four of us and we went back into that little room trying to almost recreate the situation we had when we were making *Joe Danger*," says Murray. "It was like 'Let's have this little, new startup before we think of another game'. We didn't tell any of the rest of the team about what we were making or what we were doing and we properly blocked off the door, so we had our own little entrance and stuff."

That's where the sci-fi book covers came into play. "We covered the walls, floor to ceiling, with sci-fi imagery. You can't sit in a room like that and not just soak it in, even if you don't want to." That original inspiration still holds firm in the spirit and execution of *No Man's Sky*. As we experienced walking around a planet for the first time in the game, the bright colours and strange creatures that surrounded us looked like they could have been taken right off the pages of a pulp sci-fi novel. Like so much of this sort of fiction, *No Man's Sky* is steeped in an earnest love of exploration and science.

As we walk amid deep red grass, with small mole-like creatures skittering around our ankles, we can see on the misty horizon mountains and miles upon miles of more vegetation and potential life. Pulling out a set of binoculars, we scan the animals and planets around us, identifying them and registering what minerals or resources are available. As has been mentioned before, any new discovery you find can be named by you and that will remain in place for all other players who happen to land on the same planet (if that ever happens; more on that later). Feeling satisfied that we had named enough animals some variation of the name 'Bob', we hopped into our ship and began to launch ourselves out into the cosmos, the sky turning from blue to a rich purple as we broke through the atmosphere and into near orbit around the planet. Where to now?

That was pretty much the question that seemed to plague Sean Murray in the later stages of *Joe Danger 2*. While the concept of what would become *No Man's Sky* was floating in the air, it hadn't actually been started yet and as managing director of a recently expanded team, he needed to make a decision about the future of the studio.

"I couldn't picture myself making *Joe Danger 3* or something that was of a similar size," he tells us. "And I could see that coming, almost like the lights of this truck that's going to hit you and it's moving really slowly but you can't stop it. I just wanted to get away from that. I was like, 'What I actually want to do is start up a new studio, and that sounds really bad even though I'm here with all you guys and we're all having fun and I've employed you all, I sort of just want to get away from all this'. This is the responsibility: I have to think of a game idea that will require ten people. I have to think of something that's just about doable. But not too few people needed and not too many. You end up coming up with something that's a bit like *Joe Danger*. I just wanted to do a different thing."





As you gather resources and gain new upgrades you'll be able to travel faster between planets and star clusters. A warp drive can be added and charged ready for a leap to an entirely new region of the game as you explore.

Everyone else had gone home, and I had to stay until five in the morning, so I just started writing code

And so as Murray waited through the night for a conference call with Microsoft (to talk about getting a little more attention for *Joe Danger Special Edition* on XBLA) he began to write some prototype code, fleshing out something new. "Everyone else had gone home and I had to stay until five in the morning, so I just started writing code," continues Murray. "The guys came in [the next] morning and I had stayed all night and I was like, 'We're doing it! We're going to do *Skyscraper*!'. And I had this awful demo. It looked a bit like *Minecraft*, but on a planet and I said, 'Aren't you all excited?' And no one was because it looked terrible and impossible. But I then just developed that over a year."

At this point the rest of the team began in earnest creating the game we see today. "A huge amount of the development has been into the tools and systems just to make it possible," says Grant Duncan, one of the original four founders of Hello Games and art director on *No Man's Sky*. "If it was just the play aspect, it wouldn't have taken nearly so long. So much time has been spent on iteration and the back and forth. I like the word 'research'; it makes it sound very serious, like we're scientists. 'We do important work here!' But a lot of it has been trial and error as well, and a lot of it has been born out of necessity, the procedural tools, and choosing that path."

It begs the question: how much of what Murray originally built in that late-night coding session still exists in the game as we've seen it today? "I find this really… not depressing, but… after about five months you could look at it and look at it now and go, 'that looks a bit like *No Man's Sky*'," Murray explains. "Which is a really nice feeling in some ways because there's some consistency there. You could fly between one planet and another and in fact the first planet you flew to was snowing – and a lot like the one we just showed you in some ways – so there's a moment of that being really nice. There was some consistency of vision. But there's also a moment of 'What on earth have we been doing for the last two years? It was there!'." »



QUICKFIRE QUESTIONING

Some snappy Q&A with Hello Games' managing director and co-founder Sean Murray

What's your favourite space exploration game?
I would actually say the original *Elite*.

What's your favourite space movie?
These are not easy questions! I'm going to say *Aliens*.

What fictional planet would you love to visit?
I reckon I would go for Tatooine.

Would you take the Virgin Galactic flight?
Yes. If I could afford it, absolutely.

What indie game has most impressed you recently?
Impressed is difficult. Big games for me were *Legend Of Grimrock*, *Talos Principle* I really loved. Recently *Firewatch* and *The Witness*, they are really impressive. That's actually the word I would use. This sounds bad, but I don't think they're my favourite games ever or anything like that, but they are stunning.

What's your favourite space fact you've learnt while making the game ?
My favourite thing is everyone calls star systems 'solar systems' and stars 'suns' and every time that I correct them they look at me like I'm crazy. There is only one sun and there is only one solar system. I've gotten to the point where I call everything solar systems and suns because I've given up. It's not really a fact, but I need to get that knowledge out there. It should be star and star system.

What sci-fi novel would you recommend?
Dune. That's my favourite of all time.

The building blocks for animals in *No Man's Sky* are based upon the skeletal makeup and features of many creatures on earth, as well as some stranger, original concepts. In fact, they will get stranger the closer you get to the centre of the universe, perhaps changing some of the biology established on the outer rim.



Ships are procedurally-generated, but cannot be externally customised. You can however upgrade their capabilities with a limited number of slots. Some more advanced crafts can be given bigger upgrades; trading up is an important part of the game.

Even in the dark and mysterious depths of space you need to watch how you behave. Mine too aggressively or attack alien crafts too often and you'll have sentinel robots and intergalactic police forces chasing after you.



BLURRING THE LINES

With such a massive game and talk of a full retail price-point on release, we discuss with Sean Murray what it means to be 'indie'

"I never know how to take that question," Murray says, as we bring up the question of Hello Games being an indie game maker. "I haven't had it many times, but I've had it from other indies. And it's like, 'Guys! Are you saying I'm not in the club anymore?'."

Its indie status is now occasionally questioned simply because of the scale of the game this team is making, but Murray has his answer for that. "[Being] independent is important to me; we're self-funded and we have creative control and we go and make our own games. If a game is terrible, we go bankrupt. Things like that are really important to the game making process."

We're self-funded and we have creative control

And Sony has allowed the team the space to work without interference, to maintain that independent control. "Sony has been really good. Shuhei [Yoshida, President of Sony's Worldwide Studios for Sony Computer Entertainment] doesn't come down to the office and tell us what to do. Much as I love him, it's kind of nice that that doesn't happen. Sony isn't trying to tell us how to make the game, and that's a good thing and as it should be."

So what does it mean to be indie, really? "To me I think of music, of indie bands when that meant something, innovation and taking risks and being a bit left of field. Having this overall spirit of running very close to the wire.

"It's hard to define, but the opposite of corporate, basically. That is something personally I feel that Hello Games still is. That's the bit I would actually be sensitive about. I would feel hurt if someone said 'You guys are really corporate now'. I would argue with them."





As we spend the day with Hello Games, this humility surfaces again and again, playing down what the team has achieved. Perhaps it's born of wanting to make the game feel understandable and less intimidating than its number of planets and deep mathematical foundations might suggest. More likely, it's a fear that too much hype might end up hurting *No Man's Sky* more than anything, but it *is* extraordinary. We can understand the hesitation to blow their own trumpet, but allow us to strike up the brass band in their honour. *No Man's Sky* is monumental.

The ice planet Murray mentioned is a desolate, dangerous place and one of many hostile planets you can find yourself on, dictated by their position in relation to the star they orbit. The planet is so cold in fact that, without shelter, our thermal shield is depleting. Murray explains that the shield can be upgraded, along with various other parts of your suit, as the game progresses, both by crafting new elements as you discover the designs and by trading. More on that soon.

While desolate is the word we used a moment ago to describe this planet, we wouldn't want to give you the wrong impression about how much was there to explore. Creatures still populated this world. There were caverns to delve into (offering some protection from the cold), rare mineral resources that could be converted into fuel and ammo for our equipment. While our own universe appears to be a largely barren place, Hello Games has made a clear decision to make sure every world you find has something of interest.

"We don't actually do completely spherical planets in the game; we always have some interest in them because people think the game's broken if they land on a planet like that," reveals Murray. "In the real universe you do get completely spherical planets, but not in *No Man's Sky*." Likewise, each planet is relatively uniform in its environment, which has a twofold advantage for the developer. "We could support sub-biomes and stuff like that and have poles that always have ice on them, but we want players to land on a planet and think 'Right, it's *that* planet with the red grass and the dinosaurs', and not land on the desert part of it and then ignore the planet. And there's a reason for that; every design decision that we make is held against a thing and that's 'Does this encourage people to explore and help people to want to go out?'. And I think that's what's different about the game. We've built a universe and that's what it should be about."

The other advantage, of course, is that it keeps the procedural planet formation a little easier to manage and save. Murray begins our session with the game by working through a series of test planets that shows how the mathematical algorithms at the heart of *No Man's Sky* play out world by world. What this means is that we begin on a flat planet, with nothing but a sky and a ground texture. Then we're on a uniformly bumpy world, formed from a single sine wave equation. The scale is still massive, but it's very disorientating being surrounded by identical hills as far as the eye can see. Then we warp to a world with several sine waves forming the surface of the planet and now things are beginning to look a little more natural. We're seeing how the equations that help form these planets on the fly as you discover them will create something interesting and believable.

"You can just about see how it goes up and down and if you look out at the horizon you can sort of see that it just looks like a graph," Murray interjects. "To me, that's all I see. Hopefully you're looking at something that looks like an approximation of hills and stuff, but for me it's like I'm in some kind of application that allows you to walk around inside a formula. It's super obvious to me, so I can't see it any other way."

The matrix code of the game falls away even more though on the final world where plants, animals and water are added to the surroundings. Leaping between these worlds (which we should emphasise are scaled like real planets and would take ages to traverse on foot alone) we're almost seeing a slowed-down version of how each world in *No Man's Sky* is formed in a matter of milliseconds as you approach the surface. The game reaches into its grab-bag of elements, puts them through its algorithms and a world is formed before your eyes. Once formed, it's seeded and saved for all who might return. Even the major changes you might make to the surface of the world (you can use Land Disrupter grenades to mine the planet's surface with the right upgrades) will remain.

And everything else is built this way too, from the plants to the animals. It's been an adjustment for the rest of the design team according to Duncan. "Early on in the project, I definitely didn't like the procedural aspect because I'm so used to having control over everything," he admits. "I've had complete control; I know exactly how it's going to look. And you just don't have that with procedural things. It's like a balance between adding rules to procedural systems to try and influence the results, but if you do that too much you end up taking away what makes procedural useful. You take the magic away because you're trying to control it too much. That's been a big learning curve for me, the need to relax a little bit and accept that sometimes you're going to get results that aren't exactly how you would have done it."

"I do it a great disservice when people ask how it's possible and I say 'procedural generation', but I say it as if it's magic," adds Murray, waving his hand as he repeats the words, 'Procedural generation'. "Someone asked yesterday, 'then presumably it's all made for you, so do you have anything to do?'. Yes, we're trying to make three different games. One where you're on a planet and it's a survival game and one where you're in space with combat and another where it's about joining the two up, fighting over planets and trading between them and all that sort of thing. Apart from just the content, which is procedurally-generated, it's a huge game."

Because ultimately there's a pretty big difference between random and procedural even if the latter can sometimes feel like the former. Procedural content is crafted. It's only possible through making the right building blocks and creating the systems that can merge and meld those blocks into something that always makes sense. That's been the challenge for Hello Games; masses of content creation and refining the code behind the game so that it can keep creating interesting worlds.

"It's like organised chaos," is the take of Paul Weir, audio director at Hello Games, who also has the challenge of developing a soundscape for these worlds and creatures that, chances are, he'll never get to see. "A lot of what we do is within these inherently chaotic systems, but you can contain them and make them meaningful. That's what you want. You want something to feel purposeful."

"I guess, with audio as with the art, with the procedural system it's really easy to make a huge variety of random things," adds Duncan. "It's [technically] easy to produce a million different sounds, but to make all of those sounds relevant, to have them make sense in context? It's the same with the visuals I can make. I can make a thousand creatures, and they can all look a little big ugly, but to get them looking all feeling like they're real creatures, that's where the real hard work comes in, the trial and error."

> I think of working with the procedural systems like working with a weird collaborator that is a little bit unpredictable but is like a mad genius

Walking along the development floor of Hello Games' two-storey studio we get to see some of this process unfold. A small art team (about four people) is building the animals you'll meet piece by piece. They're using a generator to constantly change their height, length, weight and more and each time you can see it's kind of the same animal, but also very different, as if the evolutionary path of the species was affected depending on the planet. When you land on a planet, just as the hills, mountains and seas are placed, so the game is asking itself, 'What animal life could survive here?' and 'What sort of characteristics might it exhibit?'. Then it begins applying skins, it gives the animal a voice, which is completely synthesised by Paul Weir's programs and adapts to the size and variety of creature, and is even given an animation style for how it walks dependent on its skeletal makeup and proportions. You won't be seeing any speedy mammoths, or at least you probably shouldn't.

"I almost think of working with the procedural systems like working with a weird collaborator that is a little bit unpredictable but is like a mad genius," is Duncan's rather excellent way of looking at it. "Sometimes they do amazing things, and I'm just journeying through the game with them, pumping out bizarre artwork."

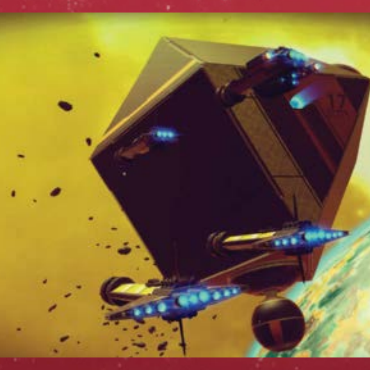
There are a lot of misconceptions still about what *No Man's Sky* really is and what procedural generation can do, though. "I think, especially as it's in a sci-fi setting, people almost assume it's a game that contains every game," says Duncan. "A lot of people, they think we've created this infinite game generator." So what is *No Man's Sky* when you break it down? What do you actually do?

It begins on the outer edge of the universe. You have a small ship and limited technology, but your overarching mission is to get to the centre of the universe. What's there? That's yet to be revealed, but you can be confident it's the one spot in the universe where you actually have a fair chance of meeting another player since they'll be heading there too. So, in the meantime, you journey and you survive. What took us a little by surprise, as we explored a small star system, was how much of a survival game this really is. On extreme hot or cold worlds you'll need a thermal shield to keep you going, but the rewards might be great. You could even upgrade this feature of your explorer to specialise in resource gathering on the outer worlds of star systems. It's not unlike *Minecraft*, in a way, as you're dropped with little knowledge and little instruction into a procedural world and you need to craft and explore in order to get further and achieve greater things.

Mojang's *Minecraft* was in fact a major influence on the team, but not for its gameplay; more as a touchstone for what can be achieved. "It's great to have *Minecraft* because you can use it for everything," Murray tells us. "There are all these rules that people thought existed such as 'People will only buy *Call Of Duty*', and it's just really nice to say that the best selling game in the world is *this*. It proves that you don't need photo-realistic graphics, it proves that you don't need massive cutscenes, it proves that you can be really creative and »











Landing pads and bases such as this can be found on many planets. In fact, in space you'll often be able to see lines leading to planets through the cosmos. These indicate trading routes of alien species, which is a good sign that you might find something on the surface.

THE NUMBERS EXPLAINED

THE IMPORTANT FACTS AND FIGURES YOU NEED TO KNOW



QUINTILLIONS QUADRILLIONS TRILLIONS BILLIONS MILLIONS THOUSANDS HUNDREDS

18,446,744,073,709,551,616

POSSIBLE PLANETS IN NO MAN'S SKY

This is based on *No Man's Sky* using a **64-bit** seed system for generating planets. And what is that? The seed number is what the game remembers to regenerate the planet again exactly as you found it, and it can handle numbers up to **64 digits** long. That leads to over **18 quintillion** possible numbers, hence that's the number of possible planets. The important word though may be 'possible'. It doesn't necessarily mean that's the total number, but rather it indicates how unique each planet has the chance to be and how many there could be without repetition.

IT'S A MATHEMATICAL IMPROBABILITY YOU'LL MEET ANOTHER PLAYER

This is something Hello Games is actually a little concerned about. The universe is so large that if **10 million** people play, they could have **1,844,674,407,371** planets each without sharing worlds. Under such circumstances all the naming mechanics and discovery might seem it's for nothing. But since everyone is heading towards the centre of the universe you should start seeing others the deeper you get into the game.

IF A PLANET IS FOUND EVERY SECOND IT WILL TAKE

585 BILLION

YEARS TO FIND THEM ALL

Pretty simple maths on this one, dividing the number by **60** to get minutes. **60** again to get hours, **24** to get days, and finally **365** to get years.

THERE ARE 16 PEOPLE WORKING ON NO MAN'S SKY

Hello Games started as four developers with triple-A backgrounds. Sean Murray was a technical lead at Criterion working on games like *Burnout 3* and *Black*. Grant Duncan arrived from Sumo Digital. Ryan Doyle was also at Criterion before working at Kuju on *Geometry Wars: Galaxies* where fellow co-founder David Ream also worked. Since then the team has expanded, first in the development of *Joe Danger*'s spin-offs and sequels to around ten developers and now to 16, with roughly 4 artists and 8 programmers making up the bulk of development staff.



KEEPING IT SIMPLE

For all the scale and complexity of the universe Hello Games is generating and guiding, the team says it has to keep things under control

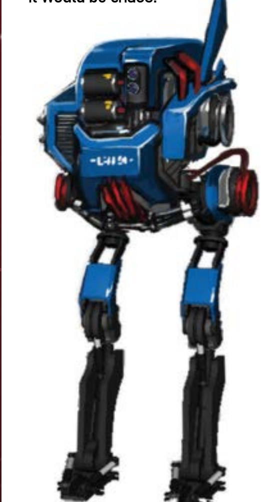
In applying procedural generation models to art design and audio, art director Grant Duncan and audio director Paul Weir, probably had the biggest adjustments to make to apply their skills to *No Man's Sky*. However, it's the simplicity of the programming that gives them room to explore and create.

"You never need to make a system more complex than it absolutely needs to be," says Weir. "If it's looking like it's complex, it's probably wrong. The research behind it, working through the problem? *That's* complicated. The solution is often really straightforward and very simple. That's what elegant programming is all about. You don't want complicated programming."

Weir pauses, hesitant for a moment, and turns to Duncan. "Was that bollocks?"

"No, it was *gold*," laughs Duncan. Weir joins in.

"For *some* programmers – not here, not ones I've tended to work with – there's almost a perverse pride in how complicated your code can be," Weir continues. "'Look at its complexity!' But actually that's not the mark of good code. We've got complex enough systems that if *we* took that direction it would be chaos."



GENERATION GAMES

No Man's Sky is the latest in a long history of innovators in crafted content randomised through mathematics. Here are some more important contributors

BENEATH APPLE MANOR (1978)



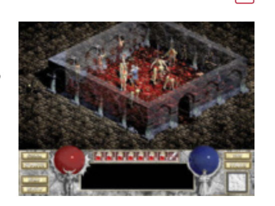
Argued by some to be the first procedurally-generated game, *Beneath Apple Manor* is essentially a roguelike, although it predates *Rogue* by a couple of years. You must work your way through a series of dungeons with ten rooms per level, finally reaching a Golden Apple as your prize on the last floor.

ELITE (1984)



The legendary space explorer used a similar system of seed numbers to store planetary data as *No Man's Sky* does now, using it as a way to reduce the amount of data that was needed to make the game. It ended up with eight galaxies containing 256 planets each, although it could have been a lot more.

DIABLO (1996)



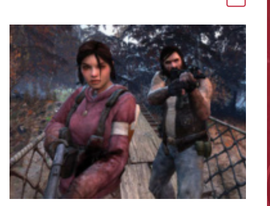
The great populariser of the dungeon-crawling genre, *Diablo* used procedural generation for its dungeon layouts, making each dive into the game something unique. The building blocks were always the same, but it kept things a little unpredictable, and would-be adventurers on their toes.

.KKRIEGER (2004)



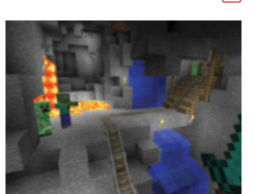
This was essentially a tech demo of what could be achieved through procedural generation to keep file sizes small. *.kkrieger* uses only 97,280 bytes of disk space to store the entire game. And as you can see, it's not a bad-looking experience. It's still available to download for free as a beta.

LEFT 4 DEAD (2008)



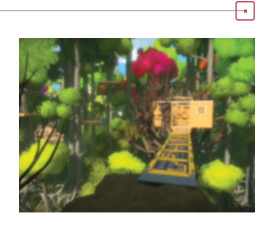
What we love about Turtle Rock's zombie co-op shooter is that while the levels are fixed, it's the AI behaviour that's procedural, managed by the game's AI Director. It reads the movement and placement of the players and sends out the horde accordingly, and that means no two games are the same.

MINECRAFT (2011)



It's one of the most played games around and every time someone starts a new game-world, it's procedurally-generated. It's actually been estimated that given *Minecraft*'s own seeding system, it could create a world even larger than *No Man's Sky*, except it keeps its levels instanced separately.

THE WITNESS (2016)



Jonathan Blow's excellent puzzle experience saves its procedural content until right at the end and it's completely optional. The final puzzles are generated procedurally and you have to complete them against a time limit, which means all that sketching and slow-solving you could do before is gone. It's devious.

Interacting with monoliths like this one will allow you to learn more of the four different alien race languages in the game. You'll often need to guess based on a limited context what the monolith wants from you to get the best result, though.

» innovative and different. You can see people in the industry using it all the time as an example, 'this disproves loads of the things that you were saying and thinking about gamers and how people play games'."

And so Hello Games has made a space survival game so vast that getting to the centre of the universe will be a Herculean task, while just meeting another player among so many planets will be such a rare occurrence it will be electric. You'll search and discover, earning money for everything you find and earning greater riches the rarer the creature (nocturnal animals, for instance, are worth more). You'll gather resources and craft new gear for yourself and your ship. And you'll trade, but not necessarily with other players because, as mentioned, they're not going to be easy to find. We got to take a look at one of the four alien races you'll interact with in *No Man's Sky* and each has its own history, language and lineage you can learn about. Each individual you meet is also procedurally created in terms of their body proportions, clothing and voice so just like in the real world every individual should look pretty unique.

The monoliths you've probably spotted in some images and videos are actually Rosetta Stones for alien speech, giving you single words that will be translated for you the text time to speak. Over time, through finding more monoliths and just having successful conversations, more words will unlock until hopefully one day you might even be fluent in an alien tongue. Of course, these languages will remain consistent so in theory someone could just translate them and post a handy dictionary online sometime after release, but even so it's a lot of fun. Chatting on the ice world with one alien on a base we could only make out one word, but figured he might want to sell us a gun for some resources. In making the deal we now had a weapon that would allow faster entry to the factory just a little further along, in which we could unlock a new technology to be crafted.

As we shot at the door and then switched to the alternate fire of a laser-cutter (better for mining), sentinels started to



What I want to scream at people is that you'll just be able to play lots of different ways

take an interest in us and attacked. These small robots float around and defend planets from resource thieves like us, but it can't be helped. If that journey to the centre is going to happen, we need whatever is behind this door. Acts of theft and space piracy are open to you if you're ready to face the consequences and we were assured that there are other ways into that factory via stealth if we could have found them, but the sentinels are always watching, even off-planet. Shoot too many cargo ships and you'll start building a wanted level and just like in *GTA*, your criminal activity will attract greater and more forceful retribution the longer you persist.

And, of course, the world persists. This is a gigantic universe so large that meeting another player is mathematically going to be a rare and special happening, but it *is* a shared world. The discoveries you make will affect other players; what they find will affect you. And with it all being made from the building blocks this team has been making for the last three years, you can't help but appreciate the craftsmanship of it all, allowing some space between different animals, plants and even sounds so that every world sounds unique instead of just a little turn of a dial different to the last, and that's taken some time and some challenging questions.

"How do you create a sound that sounds organic and could belong to a creature?" asks Weir. "How do you perform that, and how does that interact with the game mechanics? In designing that whole pipeline, we've ended up with a really interesting solution for interactive sound design for computer games. In a way, it's *totally* different to what anyone's ever done. It's a combination of computer performers and human performers and having that work in real-time in a game. There's lots of interesting ways we can take the tech from this project… It's really fascinating."



Animations are assigned to creatures as they appear to correctly match their physique. The same goes for the sounds they make, depending on their temperament and size.

So there's a lot going on with *No Man's Sky*. There's survival to consider, crafting and trade to enjoy. There's space combat and plenty of it too if you want to get into that. Space stations can be landed on – all procedurally designed, although from a slightly more limited number of base elements as we understand it. And at the centre is something to chase after. But even then, Murray seems a little uncomfortable putting everything on a chase to the middle of the universe.

"I never know if it was a good thing or not to say you have to get to the centre of the universe, because it helps people to understand the game and that's why we said it – it is an important part of the game – but what I want to scream at people is you'll just be able to play lots of different ways," Murray insists. "I'm actually pretty sure when they pick up the controller, a lot of people won't care about the centre anymore."

And when you think about *Minecraft*, do you think about the Ender Dragon or just living in its world and playing within its boundaries? If the world is rich enough and it offers enough discovery and possibility, you can just exist in the world and enjoy it. You play just to play. As you begin to see just how much there is to find and do in a good gaming universe, that really clicks into place.

In this respect, *No Man's Sky* is part of a wave of games that builds on sandbox experiences in a purer form. Murray reflects on another touchstone game as he explains his vision for a new form of triple-A experience. "*Red Dead Redemption* is a real favourite game of mine," he tells us. "I used to just go camping and stuff like that and it sounds ridiculous. Most people think there are triple-A games over *here* and then over *there* is this niche of PC gamers who enjoy games that are on Twitch and YouTube that none of us really understand. The kind of concept like *The Long Dark*: 'Not really sure why anyone plays it, but there's some kind of niche and they enjoy that and that's where it will stay'. I think there's this slow erosion taking place right now that's happening and people aren't really noticing. It's going to come crashing across triple-A, where I am sure we're going to see *Assassin's Creed* having much more sandbox-style play. That's something that I would be really excited about."

So what about *No Man's Sky* post launch? Having seen what the team has already achieved, it seems churlish to demand more, but the potential for further expansion is so clear and the references to *Minecraft* hint at future support. "There are things that we don't find core to the game, but we've obviously thought about," Murray reassures us. "And after the game comes out, once the core is out there and we have people out exploring there are things like that that we can potentially support that would be really fun. What we're trying to build is the base for the game."

And what of hopes for the game and how it will be received? Apart from everyone enjoying and coming to understand what it is that Hello Games has actually made, Duncan has a rather simple yet ambitious hope for the influence this game might have. "I remember reading a study on NASA scientists on what percentage of them had watched *Star Trek* when they were younger, and it was a ridiculously high stat," he begins. "My highest ambition is that at some point in the future, I want people, children now, to play *No Man's Sky* and be so enthralled by the experience that they make it their mission to go to Mars.

"Basically, I think the human race is pretty doomed on earth right now, and really we need a generation to get us off this planet," laughs Duncan. "I see it as my mission."





ENTER THE CHURCH OF DARK SOULS

games™ prayed at the unholy altar of Cinder and walked away cleansed by Hidetaka Miyazaki's punishing Dark Souls III

With dreary determination and a deep pang of regret, we begin our journey. Dimly flickering lights do little to combat the suffocating darkness; rain lashes wildly against a tomb of glass and steel. Gormless, broken husks of humanity shuffle off towards a distant destination, a thick aura of depression surrounding them. The thunderous roar of unholy airborne beasts is a distant concern; the nauseating smells emanating from everything around us an immediate one. The warnings hissed by other nameless weary travellers are becoming an stark reality; the pressure sets in, though we fear our greatest challenge still lies ahead. This is, after all, the quintessential *Dark Souls* experience.

But we aren't anywhere near the Cemetery of Ash. We aren't perched high atop the High Wall of Lothric, nor are we approaching the outskirts of the Undead Settlement. We are somewhere far, far worse: Heathrow Airport. Venturing through Terminal 5 at four thirty in the morning is a torturous gauntlet of hell that, at least while the experience is being endured, doesn't feel overly dissimilar to the horrors constantly unearthed in Hidetaka Miyazaki's long-running masterclass in misery. *Dark Souls* has always been at its best when it reflects the human condition – our insatiable appetite for overcoming adversity paired with a series of seemingly impossible challenges laid out in front of us. Ultimately, the mystery is what makes *Dark Souls*' misery worth it. And all this temporary airport unpleasantness would be worth it in the end, too, because we were on our way to spend hours struggling through a near-complete build of *Dark Souls III*. »

Dark Souls is at its best when it reflects the human condition - our insatiable appetite for adversity paired with seemingly impossible challenges



THE HOLLOWING

How Dark Souls III is changing its approach to humanity

Both *Dark Souls* and its sequel *Dark Souls II* featured the nasty little system where your character would become 'hollow' upon dying. You may not have even realised the implications of this happening your first time around, as the game doesn't care to explain it to you. In the original, being hollow meant you were unable to summon other players for co-op nor be invaded by enemy players. In the sequel, being hollow reduced your maximum hit points up to 50 percent – which was brutal. This could be reversed by spending a very rare resource in the form of Humanity, or Human Effigies; depending on the game.

Dark Souls III has seemingly gotten rid of the whole system. It is of course highly possible that it was simply disabled in our demo and could later return, or that From Software has grown tired with needing to explain it. Either way, we found no items in the game that would suggest reversal of the hollow state, and the only penalty we encountered in dying was dropping all of those valuable souls in often annoyingly awkward locations. Besides, the whole idea of being hollowed and humanised doesn't really fit within the lore of *Dark Souls III*. A ritualistic revival sees your character emerge from the grave, there's surely no coming back from that... right?

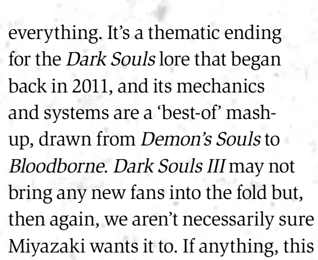
■ You'll notice visual similarities between *Dark Souls III* and its spiritual sequel, *Bloodborne*. In some cases, particularly with the enemy and world design, it looks like assets have been re-purposed.

» That means we now have a strong image of what the game is and how it compares to the previous titles in the series. We've immersed ourselves into the gothic horror with a DualShock 4 clasped in our sweaty palms and emerged with a sense of its purpose and pitfalls – though we aren't sure all of you are going to like what you hear. For one night in rainy Hamburg, Germany, we gathered for worship alongside a congregation of the From Software faithful – we were anointed as disciples to the church of Dark Souls.

There is no turning back.

A TIRELESS DEVOTION TO PROGRESS

We are past the point where the press and hardcore fans feel it necessary to evangelise on behalf of the *Souls* franchise anymore. Its demonistic roots stretch back to 2009 and if you aren't a fan already, there's likely very little that will change your mind. But in a sense, *Dark Souls III* feels like the game that *is* going to change everything. It's a thematic ending for the *Dark Souls* lore that began back in 2011, and its mechanics and systems are a 'best-of' mash-up, drawn from *Demon's Souls* to *Bloodborne*. *Dark Souls III* may not bring any new fans into the fold but, then again, we aren't necessarily sure Miyazaki wants it to. If anything, this is a glorious last hurrah before the winds of change transform From Software; a chance for the studio to say thank you to its pious followers, before setting out to expand the series and its appeal.

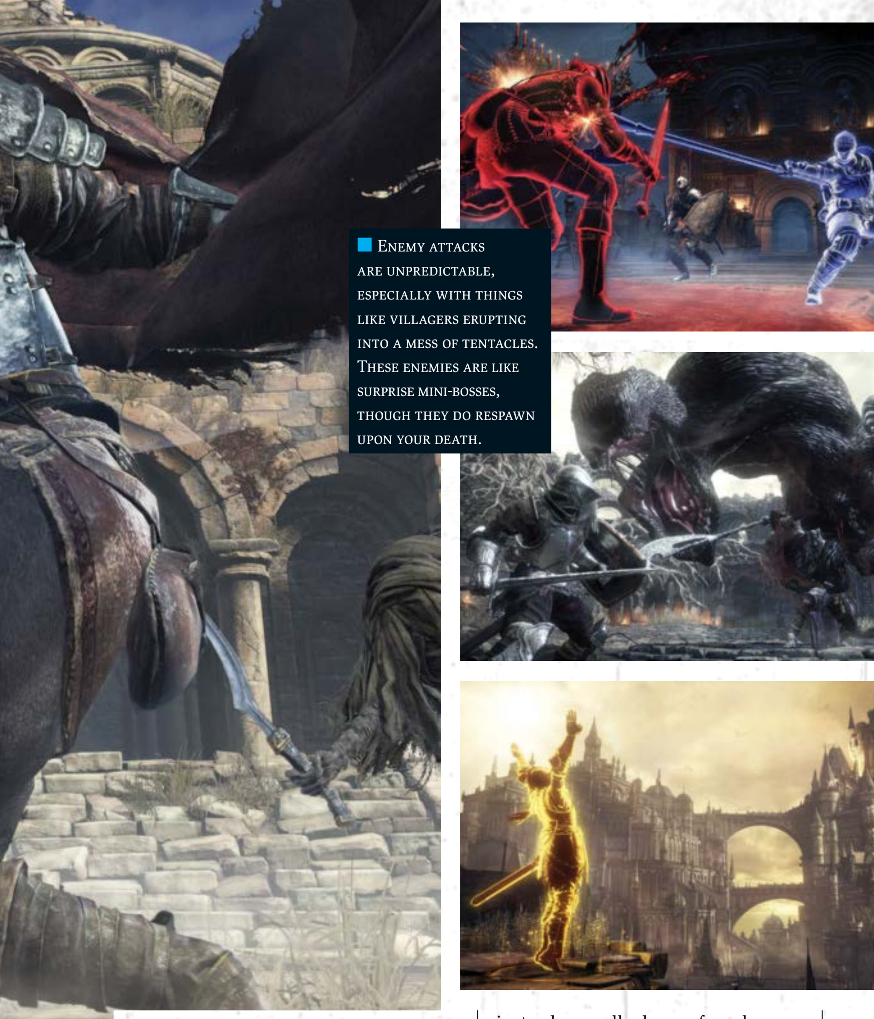


Its mechanics are a 'best of' mash-up, from Demon's Souls to Bloodborne

"For better or worse, myself and From Software are very much beholden to habit – but doing things we love can sometimes lead to different opportunities in the end," reveals Miyazaki, once again reaffirming his commitment to doing things his way and ignoring outside influences. "It delights me that the *Dark Souls* series has achieved popularity. In fact, it is very encouraging for me and provides a huge motivation to create games. I think this popularity also might help lead me towards understanding the next opportunity for the series… I look forward to an exciting future for the creators and the players who enjoy our games."

A lot of what you see in *Dark Souls III* is going to have a creeping sense of familiarity to it, perhaps even to a fault. It's incredibly reminiscent of what's come before, but with some vital tweaks made to the core formula. It's still an experience wholly focused on gathering a "sense of accomplishment through overcoming huge difficulty", as Miyazaki would put it, but the method in which you go about achieving those goals might look slightly different – unless you played *Bloodborne*, of course.

Cautiously edging out of a wooden shack into an all-new area, dubbed the Undead Settlement – a place standing in stark contrast to the towering Gothic structures we had explored up to this point, we cast our eyes over villagers gathered in worship around a flaming cross, pitchforks in-hand. A rag-clad



Enemy attacks are unpredictable, especially with things like villagers erupting into a mess of tentacles. These enemies are like surprise mini-bosses, though they do respawn upon your death.



In Hamburg, a small church was transformed into a place of worship for *Dark Souls* fans. Was it a little over the top? It sure was, but the From Software fan inside of us sure found it amusing.

witch wielding the bible conducts a mysterious ancient ritual shortly before beginning one we are only too familiar with – the villagers turn their attention to us and it isn't long before we are knee-deep in sweat as the horde descends.

The similarities between the Undead Settlement and *Bloodborne*'s Hemwick Charnel Lane are uncanny, impossible to deny. There are a lot of re-purposed assets in play; several of the environments and enemies look like they have been lifted from *Bloodborne* wholesale with a slightly different colouring. Strangely, for *Dark Souls* at least, they are brighter and evoke a little less dread than the ones found in its 2015 cousin. On the way to battle one boss, it didn't take long to realise we were walking to the same enclosed chamber housing The One Reborn – the masonry flanking either side of the walkway the tell. We left with the feeling that, were we able to run through the Undead Settlement at night, we likely wouldn't even see a difference – perhaps even thinking that Miyazaki has pulled a crazy stunt by transporting us to the world of *Bloodborne* for a spell. But instead we walked away from here wondering whether *Dark Souls III* is a little too content to retread old ground. It's difficult to summon the desire to explore – other than to find those all-important bonfires – when it feels like you are going through the motions of struggling through locales you have both explored and conquered long before.

Speaking realistically, this is Miyazaki's game and he can (as he is known to) do what he wants with it. If he's decided to reference the older games, then who are we to say otherwise – we just hope it's for good reason, and more importantly that it doesn't impede on the majesty of *Dark Souls*' design come April. A major appeal of *Dark Souls* is exploring the new areas and the thrill to be found in becoming lost in a torturous hellscape of overlapping corridors and environments that expertly double back on themselves. But with *Dark Souls III* coming out less than a year after *Bloodborne* (let alone only two years after the disappointingly bug-ridden *Dark Souls II*) perhaps it's no surprise so many of the environment and enemy assets are being re-purposed; developing on this timescale will always necessitate shortcuts. Creating a current-generation game of this size and scope is a tricky (not to mention expensive) business. To deliver the product that we want, in the time-frame expected perhaps it is inevitable to see this kind of re-purposing. Again, it's forgivable if it doesn't affect our enjoyment of the game further down the line.

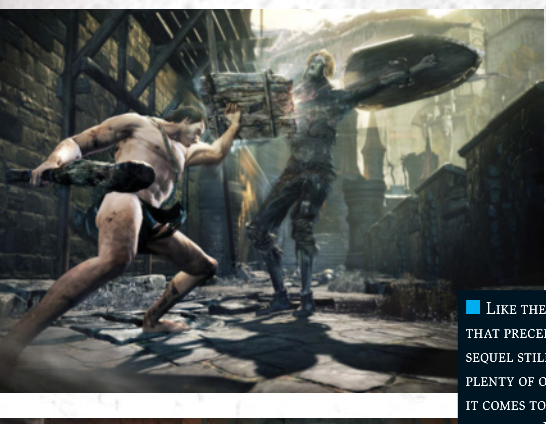
Dark Souls III was never going to be the game that presented enhanced gameplay *and* stunning new environments – it owes too much to its past. Perhaps that's why *Bloodborne* felt like such a much-needed palate cleanser. So ultimately you need to decide what's more important to you: the visual presentation or the mechanics of *Dark Souls*?

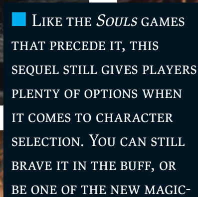
ENTER THE CHURCH

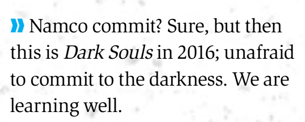
We're standing outside of a church in Hamburg contemplating the success of *Dark Souls*, two flaming torches adorning either side of a weighty door. It's a journey that took 12 hours, delayed by the inevitable breakdown of one aircraft and the slow take-off of a replacement. There were passport control clerks that looked on wearily at the arrival of English games journalists speaking in occult tongues – or, you know, discussing the finer points of the *Dark Souls* lore – and coaches exuding the smell of urine. Like we said, this is the essence of a *Dark Souls* experience.

Bleary-eyed from the journey and soaked by the rain, we heaved open the doors to the Church Of Dark Souls – it wasn't unlike entering into the arena of a boss battle for the first time. The altar has been somewhat blasphemously transformed into a makeshift stage that Miyazaki would later take to in an attempt to explain the story (it is predictably obtuse). Dry ice is pumped in from under the pews, all re-arranged behind dozens of consoles, forcing an air of eerie stillness to the place – compounded by the live organ hymns echoing around the stones.

Later, while outside, we would see a family approach the church through the darkness: they took one look at the burning flames adorning the steps to their palace of holy worship, gaze at the demonic Lords Of Cinder banners hanging from its aging architecture, and turned away, aghast. Were we concerned by the blasphemy we were helping Bandai







Like the *Souls* games that precede it, this sequel still gives players plenty of options when it comes to character selection. You can still brave it in the buff, or be one of the new magic-focused characters.

» Namco commit? Sure, but then this is *Dark Souls* in 2016; unafraid to commit to the darkness. We are learning well.

Perhaps one of the reasons *Dark Souls* has established such a fervent fan base is that, even while so much of the gameplay is soaked in ceaseless repetition and frustration, the combat mechanics have always been rock solid. *Dark Souls III* brings plenty of interesting tweaks to the series' core formula; it feels fresh but familiar – combining *Dark Souls*' cautious contemplation with *Bloodborne*'s more calculated speed of movement.

With all the *Bloodborne* comparisons, it would be easy to misinterpret that at a mechanical level. *Souls* fans shouldn't expect to have to completely relearn the game; in fact we had little trouble making it through the first two bosses – Iudex Gundyr and Vordt of the Boreal Valley – unscathed. That said, Miyazaki did inform us that the difficulty had been scaled back slightly for this build; we assume so the gaming charlatans could walk away without their spirits entirely broken. But there are a few changes that might surprise you, especially as they hark all the way back to *Demon's Souls.*

Dark Souls' predecessor used a traditional RPG magic points system to determine how many times you could cast a spell – meaning you now only needed to track hit points and stamina in the 2011 successor; spells were limited by the number of casts you had available before needing to return to a bonfire. *Dark Souls III* has re-introduced a third bar in blue, and you'll find it sat between the red health and green stamina bars. This dictates your FP (Focus Points) stat, drained using spells, but also a new type of melee system.

Once known as Battle Arts, Skills are essentially a new array of stances and attack patterns that may throw traditionalists off their game; though they don't have the same impact as, say, the Regain mechanic in *Bloodborne*. Skills range in usefulness, and change depending on the weapon you have equipped – a ready stance for piercing shields with the Knight's long sword, to rushing foes with a halberd, to activating a mace's 'stance of prayer' that reduces damage taken while activated. That all said, it's also easy enough to forget that they are even there, such little immediate impact do they have on the outcome of combat situations – which is worrying when you consider it's essentially the only major new mechanic that is being introduced in this instalment.

For the most part, combat plays out as expected, in a flurry of split-second decisions, failed parries and staring at the (ever helpful reminder) 'YOU HAVE DIED' screen. This has been augmented by the increased pace of *Bloodborne*, with back-stepping and rolling having more impetus than ever – you can even stun some enemies by rolling into their legs, we quickly discovered – now where have we seen that before? It's the same *Dark Souls*, only now it's a little faster and set against a backdrop of beautiful, visually staggering environments. Finally, a *Dark Souls* game that regards visual performance as highly as it does its combat.

This increased attention to graphical perfection also shines through in the enemy design. It's the familiar, focused through a lens of grotesque fury. You'll wait and watch, trying to figure out their movement patterns and weapon sets before moving into engagement. Though, we wouldn't blame you if you rushed in – giant rats, dangerous knights and fire breathing beasts, we've seen it all before. Fighting enemies is still enthralling, though, beating them is still rewarding, and running constantly back through the same areas – from bonfire to your Soul spot – is still a tedious exercise in contemplation. But that's *Dark Souls* for you; whether that sounds like a good time or about as fun as grinding your fingers down to bloody stumps let's you know whether you should be excited about this or not.

Digging Deep into the Story

Potential spoilers incoming, we try to work out whether there's a link between Dark Souls and its threequel

In *Dark Souls*, we've always played some variation of a Cursed Undead, a human that has since been doomed to eternal cycles of death and rebirth – essentially forcing you to lose every inch of your humanity and go hollow. Everything in Lothric is on the brink of disaster – more so than ever. Humanity has already faded, the dark times have consumed all. This means your origin in *Dark Souls III* is slightly different: a bell chimes, you emerge from a tomb, broken. You aren't referred to as an Undead this time out, but as an Ashen One.

It is often remarked in *Dark Souls III* that you are "unfit to become a Lord" which is itself a direct contrast with the events of the first *Dark Souls*. There, you *could* become a Lord: you either walked away from the flame and become the Lord of Darkness, or you offered yourself to it – much like Gwyn. The Chosen Undead was brought back to save the world in *Dark Souls*, so why are you not worthy for that this time? Why are you worthy to slay the Lords of Cinder but not become one? This will likely be *Dark Souls III*'s driving mystery.

Especially because there's a chance that you are directly connected with the Chosen Undead from the original. Miyazaki mentioned that you play as an "Unkindled", as somebody "tried to become a Lord but couldn't." What if *Dark Souls III* and the state of Lothric has spun out from your actions in the first game: that after defeating Gwyn you were unable to kindle the flame and instead faced the consequences thousands of years later. Or maybe you are the former Lord of Darkness, the Chosen Undead ashen and disgraced; punished by the Kiln of the First Flame for letting the fire – and the hopes of humanity – burn out…



Skills give players new ways to combat the horrors of *Dark Souls III*. While it isn't immediately clear as to whether they will have a huge impact on the game, it's refreshing to see new mechanics.

THE END OF ALL THINGS

If you aren't heavily invested in the lore of *Dark Souls*, or simply find it too obtuse to really care about, being trapped in a room full of muttering fanatics can be hell on earth. It sounds like chaos incarnate; frenzied, unearthly babbling summoned from the nether realms as punishment for not sacrificing hours of time to a Wikipedia page. The story is a contentious subject amongst the hardcore and casual players of *Dark Souls*, and it doesn't help that its creator doesn't seem to have that much of a stronger grasp on it.

In a presentation beset with confusion, Miyazaki attempted to explain many of the core concepts – though they were translated into statements that made very little sense. "It's a story about a guy who didn't become a lord, now he's fighting other lords," he would say in one sentence, before admitting, "Sorry I'm not very good at explaining the story… You'll find yourself asking, 'What's going on?' Well, you will just have to find that out for yourself!" Now we truly understand why the lore of *Dark Souls* is so impossible to parse, at least to those of us in the West, after it has passed through localisation.

Still, we did have time to dig into a few secrets during our time with *Dark Souls III*. If you had doubts about the game bringing story elements of the series to a close, this just about confirms the link. We quickly stumbled upon the Firelink Shrine after defeating *Dark Souls III*'s first boss, and it's largely reminiscent of *Demon's Souls*' Nexus Hub. Here we find Andre, a blacksmith that bares a striking resemblance to *that* Andre of Astora from the first *Dark Souls* outing. We also run into a familiar knight sporting an onion-shaped helmet, who identifies himself as Siegward (of Catarina, as you may recall). You can probably see where we are going with this; if there was ever any doubt in your mind that the *Dark Souls* games were linked in a metaphysical way, this should be all the proof you need.

The Firelink Shrine also serves a further purpose. Not only is it the location you'll return to in an attempt to cash in your Souls for items, upgrades and the opportunity to level up, but it also gave us a wider view of the story itself. A solemn knight reveals to us as an Unkindled – an Ashen One – that has been risen from death to hunt down the mighty Lords Of Cinder: huge, powerful, behemoths that look like frustrating boss battles later down the line.

> As long as there is a burning flame, life will continue; the darkness cannot be absolute

In the shrine we see five thrones, naming the Cinder Lords as Yhorm the Giant of the Profaned Capital, the Watchers of the Abyss, Holy King Lothric, Last hope of his Line and Saint Aldrich of the Deep. There's a withered figure sitting in the fifth throne, Ludleth the Exiled, who is the only one to not abandon the Firelink Shrine. Ludleth, we discovered with a little snooping, is the only of the five to be left charred by the process of 'Linking The Fire' – something we've come across many a time in the *Dark Souls* series. It looks like this third outing will have us forcibly returning the Lords to their respective thrones in an attempt to link the fire again to "preserve the world". As long as there is a burning flame, life will continue; the darkness cannot be absolute.

It's only possible to get a fleeting sense of the wider story from a handful of hours, that's the nature of *Dark Souls*. That's also true of the gameplay itself. It's highly likely that the difficulty curve and familiar enemies and environments exhibited here will disperse the further you trudge through the game, but we can't be certain. From Software has upped the quality of the *Souls* franchise massively here; it's the best looking, smoothest and most playable entry into the series yet, and that can only be a good thing. With its 12 April release date fast approaching, all we can do now is consider its mysteries, bow our heads to the altar of Cinder, and hope that the adversity and struggles it so lovingly advocates do not consume us entirely.



PERSUASIVE TACTICS

Where others rise and fall, strategy remains: powerful, ever-present, adored. **games™** takes a look at the evolution of the genre that pre-dates all of gaming



The traditional RTS died a slow death, and efforts like *Command & Conquer 4* failed miserably to reinvigorate the genre.

It's the oldest genre in the world, predating videogames, computer games, any form of organised *game*. It forms a base element of near enough all thought processes. Nations have risen – and fallen – because of good and bad use of it. Without strategy, there would be nothing – never mind *Civilization*, we wouldn't have *a civilisation* as we know it. Strategy is, in short, quite an interesting genre.

Inxile's Brian Fargo puts it simply: "Without strategy there is no game," he says, "Whether I'm playing *Civilization*, *Tiger Woods Golf* or *Halo* I need to be developing some kind of strategy in my mind as to how to approach the problems. It is the underpinning of what makes any game interesting and stimulating." But this is a broad look at strategy in general – it's the specific genre (admittedly broad in itself) that's such a captivating, ever-present part of gaming.

> "Whether it was Chess, Go or Senet they paved the way for all modern games"

"As a player I'm not just seeking to defeat an opponent, I'm looking to defeat a system," Tomas Rawlings, design and production director at Auroch Digital, says. "By that I mean for the player to win they have to start to understand how the system works as well as how your opponent does. You soon start to re-apply your strategy in new situations, and when it works you feel a great rush and that sense that you've outwitted the system."

It's a viewpoint shared by *XCOM 2* designer Jake Solomon, that the core of the genre in gaming is about learning a system and using it against what was originally challenging you.

"You think about this as a strategy designer – the very first games are strategy games," he says, "All of them have their roots in strategy… What's special about strategy is that it flexes different muscles. It's not about the experience of playing, your reflexes or coordination in general – but it appeals to that part of your brain, as humans we like to learn things."

It's no surprise, considering how broad the criteria to be considered a strategy game is, that there are a huge array of different games sitting under the genre umbrella. *Civilization*, *Wasteland*, *Warcraft*, the *Sim* series, the *Tycoon* titles, *Football Manager*, *Syndicate*, most (but not all) of the *X-Com*/*XCOM* games, and *plenty* of others. They're all very different games, and just because they all have strategy in them to different degrees, it doesn't mean they have the same appeal to all players. But they do have things in common.

One good example of this is provided by the *XCOM* series. Kacper Szymczak, lead designer at CreativeForge Games explains: "While being on the front lines of the war against alien invaders is undoubtedly exciting, the history of *XCOM* titles in *other* genres shows that a large part of the appeal is the responsibility for the survival of humanity. Sometimes the protagonist of the FPS has to be sacrificed by the hero of the strategy and that too is a part of the experience." Basically, there are always broader concerns at play – the death of one being a tragedy, the death of many a statistic.

»

Sometimes all a flagging genre needs is a shot of atmosphere in its arm – or lack thereof, as the case may be – and you get something as special as the classic RTS *Homeworld*.

Age of Empires 2 is a game so nigh-on perfect, it is still played and loved to this day. Even its technically better sequel can't compete.

And this universal appeal is something that has been present in strategy gaming since the very beginning. When asking our experts for their input on the legends of the genre, we were given enough names to fill a whole extra feature – *Dune II*, *Metal Gear Ac!d*, *Rebel Star Raiders*, *Laser Squad*, *Advance Wars*, and countless others we wouldn't even have considered – or even thought were classed as strategy titles.

"For me it was probably *Warcraft* in terms of the way it shook up the genre and added real time elements in for yet further brain work," Fargo explains, "*Dune* probably gets more credit for the innovation but I spent far more time with *Warcraft*. It clearly struck a bigger nerve as Blizzard is now the most successful developer in the world.

"Also, when I was young and had my Apple II computer I used to play *Computer Ambush* and boy, that was an affair of patience. It was a buggy game in which the computer would take hours to generate it's move, it would take me days to finish a game assuming it didn't crash. But still I was fascinated."

Solomon shares that obsessive feeling with Fargo – as do most of our strategy experts – but on different titles. "I thought *Age of Empires II: Age of Kings* was an absolutely perfect game. You didn't have to be a super-expert to play. I remember after I'd played a LAN game of that, I would stew on the drive home thinking what I should have done… it just consumed me. Then there was *Syndicate*," he continues, "It had an impact – I think one that's more visible in *XCOM 2* – there's that tug of dark cyberpunk. *Syndicate* always stuck with me. Outside of the original *X-Com* I think *Syndicate* has the most to do with modern *XCOM*, they're connected amorphously in my mind."

> "I'm personally looking forward to some real artificial intelligence: simulated staff or advisors we can really delegate some duties to"

And, of course, the line from *XCOM 2* traces all the way back to the original *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, which Szymczak cites as one of the most impactful on the young developer: "It created a tangible sense of dread and inadequacy when going against the intimidating alien invaders with Earth-built weapons. The tense atmosphere, line of sight mechanics and map design made turn-based battles as exciting as any real-time shootout. While not the first of its kind, UFO felt like a true blockbuster with visuals able to match the fantasy."

Finally, Johan Andersson – studio manager of Paradox Development Studio – tells us no list can be complete without *Civilization* – and who are we to disagree? "It is probably the most successful franchise ever," he says, "And I must say that without playing that game in my late teens, I probably would never have delved into making strategy games myself. Then I'd probably say the original *Starcraft*. It was the game that defined and perfected the RTS genre. It was brilliant in its UI for the time, and had absolutely stellar balance with three asymmetric sides, which impressed me to no end."

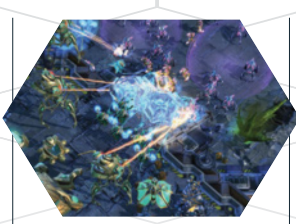


One of the grandest of all strategy games, *Crusader Kings 2* manages to produce some incredible player stories, all thanks to the depth of its experience.

This brings up an interesting point where the purer strategy genre is concerned: how little the mechanics of its games have changed over the decades. While graphical fidelity has of course improved, and the aforementioned user interface updates have made it easier for anyone to get involved, the actual central strategic elements really haven't moved much from their early days. In part because of how strategy as a concept predates almost everything, of course, but surely there have been some sea changes in the past 30 years?

Solomon doesn't think so, beyond the look and accessibility of things: "It's nuts to think about the early 90s – *Civilization*, *Syndicate*, *X-Com*, bookended probably by *Warcraft 2* when that came out. To me that was the first main RTS where it felt like a proper RTS. That early 90s period was huge. I think a lot of us as designers are still stunted by that period – we're still chasing the experiences we had hunched over the monitor, chasing that feeling of *UFO Defense* and those other games from the early 90s. I don't remember as much about my time as a kid as I do about some of those games I played back then."

While the concept of an evolution of the genre is left broader by Rawlings: "I'd say *Red Alert* – it was full on strategy (and an evolution of *Dune 2*) but into the gaming mainstream, saying 'this genre is here, deal with it'." Nobody we spoke with was able to nail down any huge step for strategy – any shift in styles or concepts or fundamentals that could be pointed at and said to be 'when things changed'. There's been no *Doom* moment for the strategy genre. But then, there's never needed to be one – it was refined and defined before computers even existed, through Chess, through *Risk*, through countless other physical, tabletop forms of gaming.



Blizzard took a long time away from the RTS genre, but when it came back, it reminded us all just what was – and is – so special about games of this ilk.



It might not have actually started it all, but Sid Meier's *Civilization* will go down in history as the granddaddy of the genre.

That tabletop factor is yet another element that still gets factored in, even today in our connected, social way of playing the highest (and lowest) tech of videogames. Rawlings explains, at least in part, why that is: "The big thing you get from tabletop is the human factor," he says, "When you're [in the middle of] a game and you start to deploy a strategy and you're hoping your opponent does not see what you're up to; that agonising wait for them to complete their turn and hoping they'll not move that tank to there but will move those infantry into close combat…it makes for such a great experience."

Fargo agrees – while gaming in the digital realm has its place, and is the main money-maker for everyone we spoke to for this feature, there's something unbeatable about the social board gaming world. "Strategy games on computer bring an ease of use and accessibility that table top games often lack," he says, "They also often hide a lot of the formula work behind the scenes so that the player doesn't have to roll dice. But nothing beats a good old strategy game feast when your friends are sitting right there with you.



5 LESS OBVIOUS STRATEGY HEAVYWEIGHTS

Without Civ or XCOM, what is there? Plenty, it seems



Company Of Heroes

When the RTS genre was all but dead on its feet, in came this plucky young Second World War upstart and single-handedly reinvigorated and entire sub-genre. Its sequels are fantastic, but the original still has such an incredible *feel* to it, it's hard to recommend anything else in the series over it.



Defcon

Mutually assured destruction is something satirists can have a field day with when it comes to discussing how it can be called a 'strategy' with a straight face. But in playing *Defcon* you realise just how the total annihilation of life on earth could play out with a bit of thought behind it. Also, it's actually terrifying.



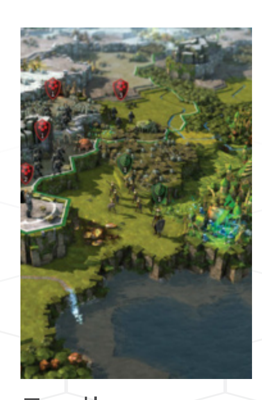
Sins Of A Solar Empire

When PCs got more powerful, their strategic elements got deeper. Or, they got *bigger*. SOASE is of the latter, with your strategic thinking all going into making the biggest, most effective space fleet possible to conquer the galaxy. A blunt instrument, but it's still fantastic fun.



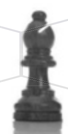
Neptune's Pride

Some turn-based strategy games have you waiting minutes between turns, as you figure out your next move. *Neptune's Pride* can have you mulling things over for days, even though it's real-time. Focusing almost entirely on high-level strategy, it's a pure, unique experience.



Endless Legend

A descendent of the groundwork laid out by *Civilization*, *Endless Legend* makes you explore, expand, exploit and exterminate your way through. The strategy comes in choosing an approach for each situation, and the mechanics of the game make it one that's impossible to ignore.



Blurring the lines

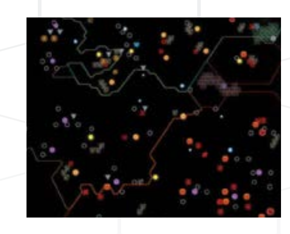
Because not everything is pure strategy

Football Manager



Shouting at your screen after your allegedly good players have lost their third game in a row might not seem strategic, nor does the 'bid all the money' approach to transfers, but *Football Manager* has become an increasingly strategic game as it has become more complex. Mind games and careful management of individuals, bosses and fans all comes together.

Galactic Civilizations 2



Along with all other 4x games, *Galactic Civilizations 2* (and its series stablemates) blends elements of management, simulation, planning, building, combat and strategy. It is the kind of thing that can and will take over many hours of your life should you give it half a chance.

Prison Architect



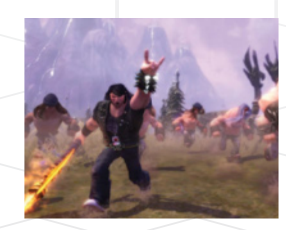
What could have been a simplistic building simulator becomes so much more strategic when you realise how much consideration can be made for your inmates and staff. Foresee problems and nip them in the bud with strategic planning of an entire prison system – showing the US for-profit model how it should be done.

Sim City



The blend here comes with *Sim City* being a game of management, simulation and planning – with strategy being the meta element tying everything together. Fail to plan accordingly, and an entire city will fail before your very eyes. A masterful series, bringing the best of each genre to the fore.

Brütal Legend



The example of what can go wrong when blending genres – especially in a console world, where strategy has never really enjoyed a foothold. Under-explained they might have been, Double Fine's surprising insertion of RTS elements to this Jack Black vehicle was actually good fun to play, if ultimately shallow.

» "You cannot deny the origins of strategy games going back thousands of years. Whether it was *Chess*, *Go* or *Senet* they paved the way for all modern games. Even games like *Wasteland* were inspired by and used the rules of Mercenaries, Spies and Private Eyes – and of course *Wasteland* inspired *Fallout*. Everything always draws a clear line back to tabletop."

The difference in experiences provided by the digital and physical worlds of strategy gaming are so vast, though, that they can peacefully coexist for the foreseeable future. If anything, the rise of videogaming has preceded the resurgence of the tabletop gaming world, with one feeding back into the other and vice versa – the *X-Com* born from tabletop roots, with the *XCOM* reboot birthing a physical, tabletop game of its own. It's a positive feedback loop the likes of which we haven't seen before, and it's leaving us all spoiled for choice – almost to a fault, as there's just too much around to be able to play it all.

"I believe that both flavours of strategy can and do learn a lot from one another," Szymczak says, "Tabletop games became more immersive and visually attractive to capture the interest of the videogame generation, often adopting clever devices and systems (both analogue and digital) to simulate and keep track of more complex scenarios. At the same time tabletop games remain easier to prototype which makes them attractive to amateur designers. They also attract a slightly different audience, initially, building awareness and testing mechanics which can then be brought into the digital realm.

"I mean, *Chess* used to be seen as a simulated battle – a king's game which entertained and educated at the same time. It's still the best mainstream reference, which both gamers and non-gamers should understand!"

This is another common theme in our discussions on strategy – it all comes back to the early days, to things like *Chess*. In many ways, modern strategy videogames are better than *Chess* – they have the (sometimes literal) bells and whistles to make the experience more engaging and impactful. But not one of our designers would honestly say their games – or any games – were objectively better than that strategy legend. Too much is borrowed or otherwise appropriated from the battle of kings, queens, pawns and knights; *Chess* is simply too *pure* an experience to be one that can be 'bettered' in any believable way.

So does that mean the future is an unexciting one? That the genre of strategy will stagnate, unable to evolve past things like prettier graphics and slightly easier UIs? Of course not. On one hand, strategy as a genre – as a game type – has survived and thrived for years, decades, centuries and millennia. It has staying power. And on the other hand, we're always seeing exciting developments in the world of technology and gaming – and it's all going to feed back into the genre of genres.



Ultraviolent it might have been, 1993's *Syndicate* nevertheless brought strategic concerns like careful management of drug intake and whether or not you should try and persuade that cop to the fore.



Wasteland 2, like the original, is a package of two very different sides: one an epic, gloriously-written RPG. The other, a fine, turn-based strategy game – which will punish you for your transgressions.

Szymczak points out some of the huge shifts we've already seen in strategy: "Being able to simulate large-scale trends in *Democracy 3* or the insanely complex politics of *Europa Universalis IV* makes things more interesting and customisable," he says, "While AI keeps improving, the ability to play beside or against human players can also enhance the experience in many different ways. I'm personally looking forward to some real artificial intelligence: simulated staff or advisors we can really delegate some duties to and so on. Combine it with virtual or augmented reality and my fantasy of running an Imperial Sector Fleet from *Battlefleet Gothic* gets ever closer."

Elsewhere, Fargo is also extremely positive about the future of the strategy genre – thanks in no small part to the changes and updates we've already seen: "The biggest fundamental change has been design that incorporates using the internet," he explains, "Whether it's a matching service like Battle Net or simple peer to peer gaming, it changed everything. Imagine the old play-by-mail days in which you awaited your friends response via the post office. The next big step will be VR in which we feel more connected by sitting in a virtual room for each other. Games have just begun to have their real power."

This feeling clearly runs through the development community, and it's being felt both inside studios and even now outside, in the cut-throat world of publishing and marketing – thanks in no small part to certain mobile and casual titles being based almost entirely in the strategy genre. "Interestingly, strategy-related games are in the ascendant at the moment," Rawlings tells us, "At a conference I was speaking at, one of the presentations was on the trends in mobile genre, and *Clash of Clans* and *Fire Age* showed strategy dominating the field. The resurgence of *XCOM* in recent years has also been part of this. However I can recall a few years back pitching turn-base strategy titles and getting no traction because it was seen as an 'older' genre. Not so now!"

So it's all rosy? Of course not – there are valid concerns; we can't let ourselves run away with ideas, or just assume that because strategy has been around forever, it'll be popular no matter what people do with it. Solomon airs his caution: "I get turned off by my own mechanics if they're boring, or complicated or whatever – so I think the danger would be to make things too complicated… I don't believe there's any objective value in complication. Complexity is good. I'm more impressed by designers who can do things simply, rather than by people who just throw another fucking system at something. I don't think an enormous amount has changed, and I think that's because strategy is much, much, *much* older than the videogames that are trying to present it. And there's only a limit to what the human brain can cope with."

And yet… "I think we reached our limit pretty early on in videogames," Solomon continues, "There haven't been that many changes, just in terms of a shift from simulation to game-games.

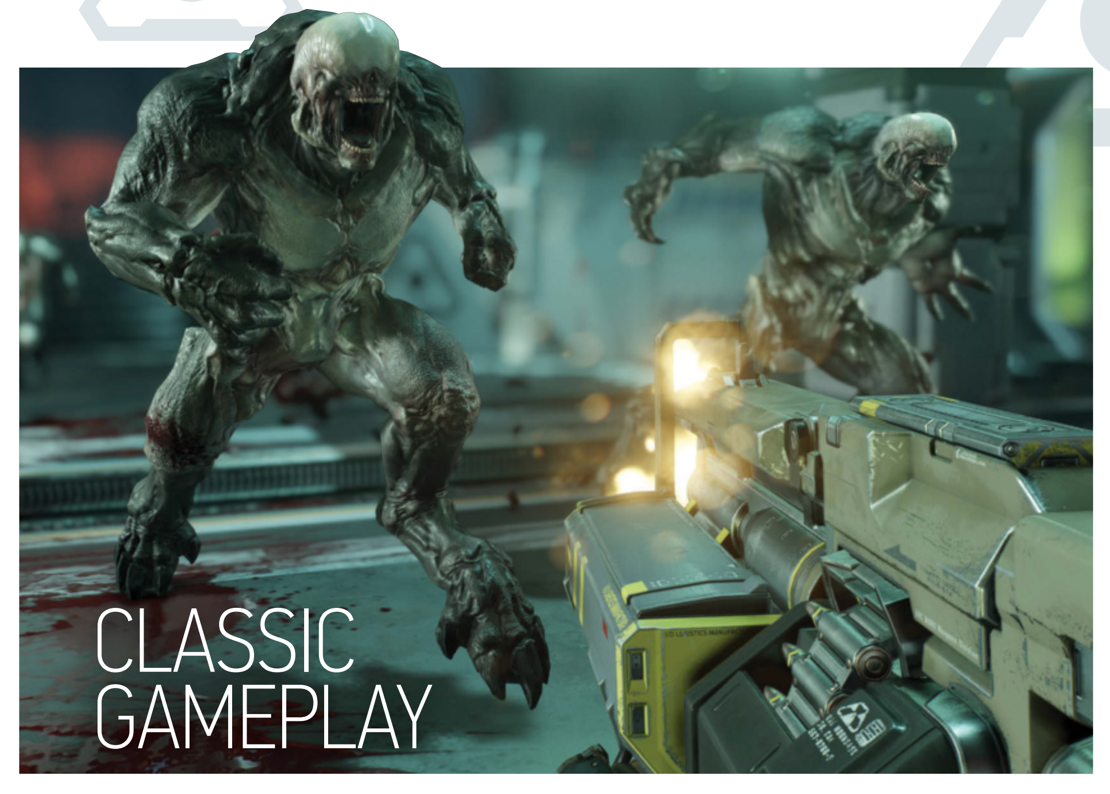
"At the same time I think it's stupid to say that, because at some point someone will just come along and release a strategy game that blows us all out of the water with new ideas. What do I know?"

> "I don't remember as much about my time as a kid as I do about some of those games I played back then"

15 WAYS DOOM IS MAKING HELL FUN AGAIN

Developer: id Software **Release date:** 13 May 2016 **Format:** PS4, Xbox One, PC

After nearly 12 years away from the frontline of gaming, ***Doom*** is returning and while its development has been challenging, the final game looks to have recaptured the same spirit as id's original shooters. By harking back to some older shooter concepts, *Doom* is looking to revitalise the genre and stand out from the military shooter crowd. But just what exactly has the team added to *Doom* to make it so much fun?



CLASSIC GAMEPLAY

01 Perhaps the most important choice made by id Software in the development of *Doom* has been to stick to what the series has always stood for rather than chasing some new vision of what the FPS is supposed to be. Not only does that mean that 2016's *Doom* has a classic, down-the-barrel feel to it, but actually, if anything, it's more in tune with the upcoming trends. We're seeing more and more shooters embrace a faster pace, run-and-gun, keep-moving-and-keep-shooting approach now and it's making things much more interesting again after years of dour military shooters.

CLASSIC GUNS

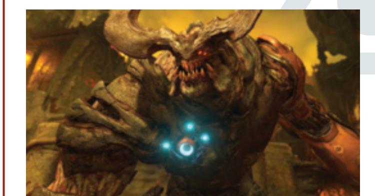
02 It wouldn't be *Doom* without the shotgun, minigun and of course the BFG, so that's exactly what you'll find in the new game. There are some new weapons, but it's important to note that they only expand the options rather than supersede the classics. With a new game it might have been tempting to put a new stamp on it and create some new uber-weapon that would surpass all others, but the BFG is still the most powerful and brutal gun in the game. It has reverence for its past both in terms of moment-to-moment gameplay and weapon feel.

HELLISH WHISPERS

THE SPIDER MASTERMIND AND ARCH-VILE ARE BELIEVED TO BE RETURNING FOR ID'S NEW DOOM

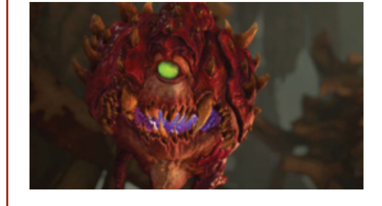
A NEW HELL

03 Since this game is harking back to the classic *Doom*s of the Nineties, it needed an entirely new approach to how it depicted Hell. Those first couple of games may stick in your mind as being pretty gruesome, but actually they were a little flat by modern standards. As such, id needed to get a little creative and the result is closer to what you probably had in your head when playing the series back in the day. The team has gone back to the kind of heavy metal album cover images that would have inspired the original developers as well as adding some touches of their own.



INSPIRED BY RAGE

04 id's last big game was *Rage*, so it should come as little surprise that it has had some influence on the way *Doom*'s 2016 incarnation has turned out. While the story and open-world feel of that title has not travelled over, some of the traversal and AI behaviour has and that's very welcome. You'll find you have a great amount of freedom to clamber and climb around the environment, but so will the enemies you face; you can move around the environment quickly, so can they…



CUTTING EDGE TECH

05 Legends such as John Romero and John Carmack may no longer be working at id Software, but their legacy lives on at the company and many of their former colleagues are still there, even if their names are not quite as well-known. Carmack in particular leaves an important legacy in the form of the id Tech 5 engine, which has been modified and enhanced for *Doom*. We already saw a glimpse of what it was capable of with *Rage*, but frankly the last generation of hardware just wasn't ready for what this engine can do. Now is the time for id Tech 5 to shine. »

FULL CAMPAIGN

06 In what almost feels like another throwback to an earlier era of shooter game design, id has made clear that we should expect a healthy solo campaign length from its latest offering. 13 hours is the estimate currently being floated on social media, depending heavily on player skill and the difficulty level being used. Still, that's at least twice as long as most FPS campaigns of recent memory. Given the pace and carnage of what we've seen so far, there might be some concern as to whether it can sustain such relentless mayhem for that long, but we're keen to see it try.



FULL-ON SPEED

07 The pace of *Doom* is a refreshing shock to the system. There's no sprint button; you're running all the time. Camping is the fastest way to get yourself killed and using a scope is risky at best. The fluidity here can be breathtaking as you weave between demons, separate them from the pack, take them out and move on. It may look very different to its Nineties forebears, but in terms of the constant and speedy movement, this is very close to those games.



GLORY KILLS

08 One thing that we feared might break that pace was Glory Kills, the finishing moves you can use on demons once you get them in a stunned state, but that couldn't be further from the truth. The closest analogue we can think of with this new addition is the way you earn nitro in *Burnout*. In that game, the more risks you take, the faster you can go. In *Doom*, the closer you get to your foes, the faster you replenish health and ammo. So if you get low on supplies, a couple of nice Glory Kills will earn you a little extra reward and get you back in the fight quicker.

UNAFRAID OF FAILURE

09 Strangely, one of the things that gives us the most confidence with the new *Doom* is that it nearly came together a few years back and the development team threw what it had built away. Back in 2011, *Doom* was apparently on the path to a fairly standard sequel, but it just didn't feel right so id got rid of it and started over. That's a pretty bold move with a brand as recognisable as this, because frankly any *Doom* is likely to have done alright. Instead they all went back to the beginning and completely rethought their approach. While we may never know what was lost, this is looking pretty good to us.

HELLISH WHISPERS

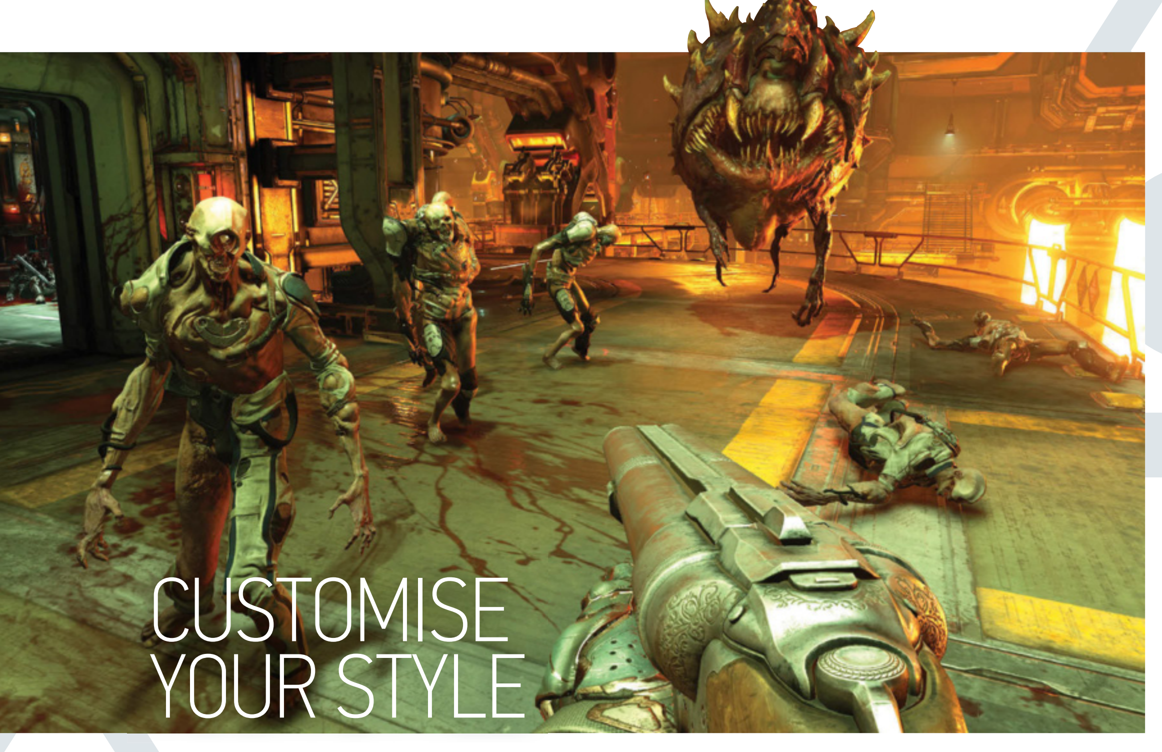
DATAMINING OF A RECENT ALPHA TEST SUGGESTS THAT SOME BOSS BATTLES MIGHT BE RANDOMLY TIMED



FUN DRIVES EVERYTHING

10 Speak to the development team and they'll tell you, if they're not sure whether or not a new gun or feature should be added to the game, the first question they ask is: 'Is it fun?' Everything else comes second. One example of this actually came from a feature quietly integrated from the *Quake* series in the form of jump pads. The idea apparently arose that they might be interesting things to add to the new vision of Hell. Did they make sense with the world they were building? Probably not. Are they in the original games? No, they are not. But did they add some fun? Absolutely, so the team simply found a way to justify them.





CUSTOMISE YOUR STYLE

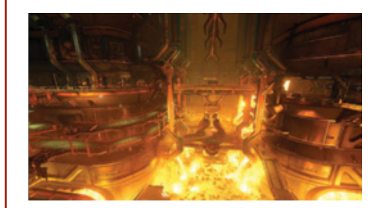
11 One element that has migrated over from more contemporary shooters is the concept of player customisation and that takes a number of forms. For a start, you can earn currency in game to spend on new armour loadouts for your Doom Marine, customising your head, torso, arms, and legs ready for battle. What you can also unlock are gameplay modifiers that can be used after each death so that you kick off the level wearing armour or with a little extra health. There are a number of options and each just gives a little tweak to the game.

SUBTLE NEW STRATEGIES

12 You can also express yourself through your playing style, and this is supported further through things like secondary firing options on all of your weapons. Shotguns offer a triple-fire option, for instance, or you can detonate a rocket from your missile launcher before impact to take advantage of a little splash damage. These small adjustments can help you thin out and control crowds of demons as you whizz around and pick them off with some nasty close-quarter kills. There's actually a nice amount of strategy buried in amongst the crazy gore and gunfire.

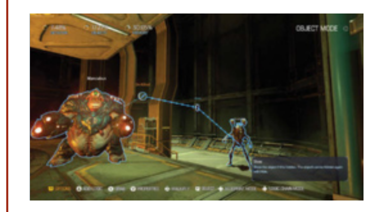
MULTIPLAYER TWISTS

13 The classic feel of the new *Doom* is exemplified by the arena shooter base of its multiplayer gameplay, but that doesn't mean you should expect basic deathmatch and CTF modes. A great example is a mode called Warpath, which on the surface is a king of the hill variant, but in this example the zone you need to occupy is always moving along a fixed path. Opposite to that zone is a pentagram from which you can respawn as a Revenant or Baron Of Hell. So, you get the classic siege gameplay of KOTH, but with constant movement and demons.



A NEW FPS ICON

14 Whatever you want to say about id, you can't claim it lacks ambition. The developer has set itself no smaller task than to create an FPS for the modern era that can be as iconic and culturally impactful as the original *Doom*. Frankly, that seems like a challenge too far even for a game as cool-looking as this one, but the fact that it set itself that bar and reached for it so earnestly means a lot. It doesn't strike us as a coy marketing line. This team really wants to achieve that level of success and we admire that enthusiasm.



MAKE YOUR OWN MAPS

15 When it all comes down to it though, if you don't really like what id has made with the new *Doom*, you can just make something of your own within the game. The SnapMap functionality lets you create your own multiplayer maps and challenges, and offers masses of functionality and customisation. You're restricted to working with pre-existing objects from the game, so it's not a full map tool in the way classic *Doom* players might remember, but it is pretty versatile. Apparently the team already has a tower defence mode working using the tools.

LAUNCH SPECIAL

OCULUS RIFT

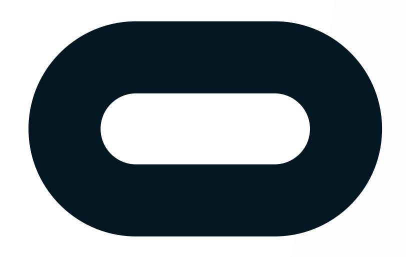
With Oculus Rift now available to the public, **games™** investigates whether years of hype and anticipation have been matched by a killer end product

Virtual reality has the potential to change the way we look at and experience, well, just about everything. That's not a statement made purely for editorial impact, it's just the reality of the situation we now find ourselves in. Between the HTC Vive, PlayStation VR and Samsung Gear VR, virtual reality is primed to take the world by storm in 2016. Each headset offers different experiences for vastly different audiences, and the ranging financial barriers of entry reflect that.

Valve's collaboration with HTC has brought about the Vive, undoubtedly the first premium consumer VR headset – and one that refuses to compromise on its graphical and processing power, giving it a price tag to match that pulls no punches. The PlayStation VR is positioned to exclusively cater to gamers, using a plug-and-play design, while Samsung Gear VR has already impressed as a mobile-ready device with a lot of potential.

But of course, all eyes are on Oculus Rift. As far as we're concerned, it's the first major consumer-targeted VR device to hit the market since the Eighties – for all that VR technology is actually looking genuinely impressive these days, let us not forget the Virtual Boy and its terrible, migraine-inducing experiences. But Oculus Rift re-ignited the VR spark for many game developers, cinematographers, architects, medical professionals and social media gurus around the world when it was originally pitched on Kickstarter in August of 2012; the crowd-funding campaign ended up with 9,522 believers putting down a combined $2.5 million – though even that pales in comparison to the $2 billion dollar investment made by Facebook in 2014.

And so here we are, almost four years later. There's a finalised device, a launch price, a wave of exclusive videogames, a pre-order campaign and, of course, a release date. But after so many years of hype, expectation and concern, we find ourselves asking that all-important question: has it all been worth it? »



IS YOUR PC VR READY?

■ There's a lot of very sophisticated technology packed into the Oculus Rift and it needs an appropriately-scaled PC to properly function. That means that it's time to upgrade. While Oculus has revealed a handful of pre-built machines that come out of the box VR ready, they are rather expensive – Alienware's X51 R3 begins at £775 – it'll likely be cheaper to upgrade your current set-up.

VIDEO CARD	NVIDIA GTX 970 (£270) / AMD R9 290/380 (£190) equivalent or greater
CPU	Intel i5-4590 equivalent or greater (£160)
MEMORY	8GB+ RAM (£30)
VIDEO OUTPUT	Compatible HDMI 1.3 video output
USB PORTS	3x USB 3.0 ports plus 1x USB 2.0 port
OS	Windows 7 SP1 64 bit or newer



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

OCULUS RIFT

POSITIONAL TRACKING SENSOR

OCULUS REMOTE

XBOX ONE WIRELESS CONTROLLER

DETACHABLE HEADPHONES W/ MICROPHONE

LUCKY'S TALE

EVE: VALKYRIE (W/ PRE-ORDERS)

PRICE
£499.99
$599.99

RELEASE DATE
28 MARCH 2016

OCULUS RIFT TEARDOWN

Breaking down the headset that started a VR revolution

There's a lot of pressure for the Oculus Rift to deliver. **games™** has been following the cautious evolution of the virtual reality headset since the launch of the first prototype and, looking at the final product, it surprises us just how far the technology and design has come in a mere four years. Ever since we first got our hands on a DK1 development, we saw the potential – though it was difficult to imagine the weighty, clunky mess of wires ever being ready for general release. But Oculus kept evolving the Rift, bringing coding guru John Carmack – previously of id Software and *Doom*, *Quake* and *Wolfenstein 3D* fame – into the fold. And we can only imagine that a two billion dollar investment from Facebook didn't hurt, either. The resulting product is something lifted straight from a sci-fi movie, a consumer-focused virtual reality headset that's ready to not only change the way in which we interact with our virtual gaming worlds, but also other forms of entertainment, education, and social interaction.

GET CONNECTED

The Oculus Rift isn't wireless; it requires an HDMI cable to be run from the device to your PC, though an optional DVI adaptor for laptops and some graphics cards will be made available. It also includes a 10ft USB cable – which powers the device – and includes a USB port so you can connect a controller or headphones. These connections make the Rift a little heavier than expected, but it doesn't cause any discomfort.

AUDIO UPGRADE

Curiously, the Oculus Rift now comes with an integrated microphone, and a pair of detachable headphones. We don't know why you would want them, mind, as the Rift's audio solution uses Head-Related Transfer Function (HRTF) tech to create a sense of true 3D audio spatialisation. Essentially, it means the Rift can immerse the user aurally in a virtual world with realistic sound rendered from all directions. It's incredibly impressive tech that works better than we could have imagined.

REFINED COMFORT

A lot of questions have been asked about Rift's ability to provide safe, comfortable play for long durations, and Oculus has clearly worked hard to make it as user-friendly as possible. The vertical and horizontal velcro straps can be adjusted to fit different head sizes; the lenses can be switched out to increase or decrease magnification of the OLED screens, and you can even adjust how far they are from your eyes. Interestingly, this also means this iteration of Rift is incredibly comfortable, even for glasses-wearers.

POSITIONED IN 3D SPACE

It's impossible to overstate how important it was for Oculus to get this right; we've seen Oculus play with various iterations of tracking technology – essential to track your position in a 3D space in real time – and this discreet little device handles it perfectly. A series of infrared LEDs are hidden away in the headset and then monitored by this little device using Oculus' Constellation Tracking System. In means you have full 360 degree perspective, which is integral for games such as *Adr1ft*.

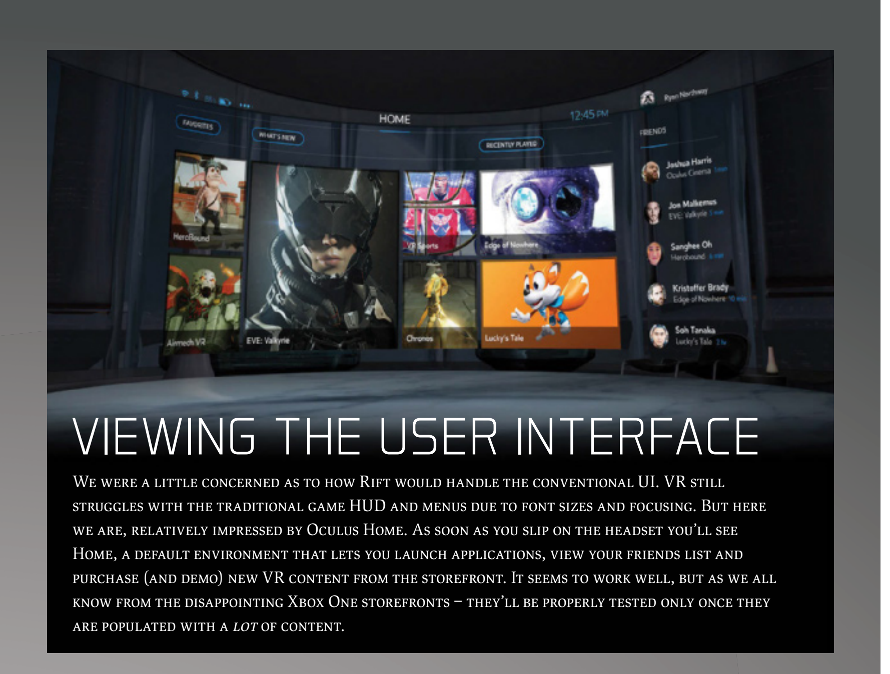


MICROSOFT PARTNERSHIP

While Oculus will support an array of control options from launch, it's the Microsoft partnership that has truly opened up the Rift to the possibility of being a gaming platform; every device will come bundled with an Xbox One wireless controller. As you can't see your hands when wearing the headset, it makes a huge difference to the physical act of playing a game with such a ergonomic gamepad in your hand – and to think, the DK1 had us struggling with a mouse and keyboard.

FOV DETAILED

Thanks to the combination of the on-board Adjacent Reality Tracker and the separate Constellation Tracking System, the Rift is able to show the user a 110-degree field of view. This means you can look around freely within the device and see a natural FOV, with only a minimal amount of screen blurring towards the edges. Rift also features six full directions of rotational and positional tracking; all working at a precise, low-latency, and sub-millimetre accurate level for a smooth gaming experience.



VIEWING THE USER INTERFACE

We were a little concerned as to how Rift would handle the conventional UI. VR still struggles with the traditional game HUD and menus due to font sizes and focusing. But here we are, relatively impressed by Oculus Home. As soon as you slip on the headset you'll see Home, a default environment that lets you launch applications, view your friends list and purchase (and demo) new VR content from the storefront. It seems to work well, but as we all know from the disappointing Xbox One storefronts – they'll be properly tested only once they are populated with a *lot* of content.

THE SCREEN

The DK1 unit used to use a 7-inch LCD screen, it was a low-resolution display that revealed a startling truth: consumer focused-VR might be here, but games weren't going to look great on it. But as technology has evolved, so too has the Rift. The retail device comes fitted with two OLED screens (one for each eye), displaying at a resolution of 2160 x 1200 and a refresh rate of 90Hz. That means that not only does the Rift display crisp, high-definition images straight to your eyes, but it's smooth too – motion sickness is essentially eliminated.

TECHNOLOGY EXPLAINED

Powering this device is a single custom motherboard, which comes equipped with an ARM processor, control chips for the LED screen, and the 'Adjacent Reality Tracker' – originally developed independently of Oculus. It features a magnetometer, a gyroscope and an accelerometer, which all sync up to determine your exact position in a 3D space. It originally tracked movement 250 times a second (250hz), and the final device tracks at up to 1,000 times a second – ensuring the Rift tracks insanely small head movements.

HOW DOES RIFT HANDLE OVER AN EXTENDED PLAYTEST?

One of the biggest problems facing virtual reality is the question of playtime and the potential repercussions. Being that this is brand new technology, it'll likely be a while before we get definitive answers on whether or not long gaming sessions inside VR – with your eyes so close to two very powerful, magnified screens – will have any long-lasting effects. We've often heard developers cite that children under 12 years of age are being advised against long sessions as their eyes are still developing; so if you have kids and want to take them on a virtual-reality adventure, it is worth monitoring the length of their play sessions.

Our longest VR session to date has been with *EVE: Valkyrie*, which clocked in at around six hours of near continuous play. While motion sickness thankfully wasn't an issue, eye strain and mental exhaustion were. Ultimately, as *Valkyrie*'s lead designer Andrew Willans tells us, it's in the hands of the players to decide when they've had enough time inside Rift – developers aren't in the business of telling players when and how they should consume their videogames. "I think that's in the hands of the users; we can't really control that," says Willians. "Nobody gets ill, nobody gets sick, there's no [limitation] saying you can only do it for this long. It's really up to the user to manage their game time, just like anything else. It isn't something that's exclusive to VR, let's put it that way."



A BUSY YEAR AHEAD

How does Oculus Rift compare to the competition?

With three major players landing on the VR scene in 2016, we stack them up against each other to see how the competition is really looking for this exciting new market

[HTC VIVE]



£639.99/$799.99

AUDIENCE

THE HARDCORE

Valve wasn't messing around when it teamed up with HTC to launch the Vive. This is a seriously impressive, if expensive, piece of technology. But, for that heavy price, you're getting an incredibly accurate VR headset that features a front-facing camera – to interject real world elements into the virtual space. It's been built in such a way that you can get up and walk around inside a virtual world for the first time, but that does mean you need a clear 15x15ft space for it to work properly.

[PLAYSTATION VR]



£299.99/$399.99 (EST.)

AUDIENCE

THE GAMER

At the time of writing, Sony is still yet to confirm an RRP for the PlayStation VR headset – previously Project Morpheus. Still, this is a consumer-focused device aimed at keeping the barrier to entry low – both in terms of set-up and price – though that will naturally affect the hardware itself. Its plug-and-play nature is good news for the PC-averse, though we have concerns over the device being able to appropriately render 90 frames-per-second images, which is required for VR to eliminate motion sickness.

[OCULUS RIFT]



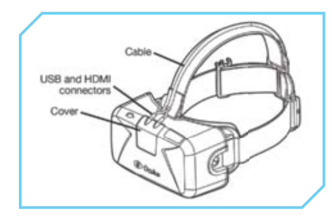
£499.99/$599.99

AUDIENCE

THE FUTURIST

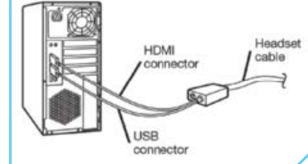
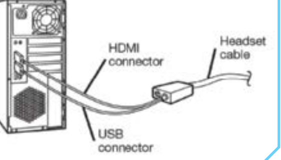
This is the first step into an all-new world, and it's likely that there will be some road bumps. Oculus, in spite of its Facebook backing, still feels like the underdog in many ways. It's easy to see the passion behind the project – 23-year-old creator Palmer Luckey built the first prototype in his garage – but there could be some kinks to work out as the first commercial units begin to land. But it's here, Oculus has done what it set out to do: it has given the world a genuine reason to get excited again about VR.

HOW TO SET UP YOUR OCULUS RIFT



1 UNBOX THE HEADSET

Once you've got the Rift in your hands, you'll want to take note of the cable running from the top of the headset. Make sure it is attached securely to the ports on the front of the unit, and make sure it isn't obscuring the LED sensors in any way.

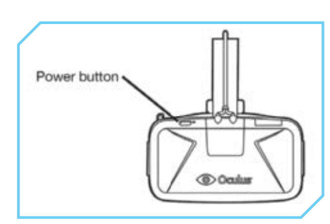



2 CONNECT TO YOUR PC

At this point, you should have already checked the PC specs, and upgraded if necessary. Next, you'll need to make sure you have a spare HDMI and USB port open. Connect up the 10ft cables to your PC, but be wary of using extenders – it will interfere with the signal.

3 START THE CONFIGURATION

Attach the positional tracker to your PC via USB, then grab a comfortable chair and adjust the height. From here, you'll want to run the sync cable from your Rift into the sensor and position it towards you at eye level, at least five feet away.



4 TURN ON THE FUTURE

Go ahead and turn on the Rift, you'll find the power button on the top right of the headset. The screen will begin to power on, though you should be wary of an LED light atop the device. Blue means everything is fine, but orange means that there are signal issues to resolve.





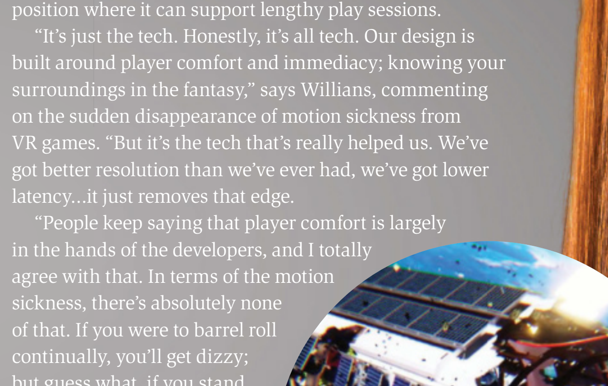
MANAGING MOTION SICKNESS INSIDE A VIRTUAL WORLD

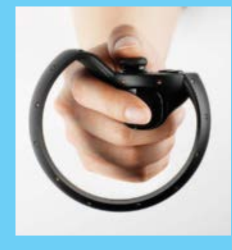
Has Oculus eliminated queasiness?

One of the biggest concerns going into virtual reality was the fear of crippling motion sickness destroying any sense of long-term immersion. If we think back to every time we've had the opportunity to get eyes-on with Oculus Rift pre-2015, almost every game demo we played lasted for roughly 10 to 15 minutes and would leave us caught between trying not to vomit and completely awestruck by the technology. Thankfully, motion sickness has been all but eliminated from the games that we've played on the final headset build. Thankfully, the technology has evolved to match developer ambition. The device is now in a position where it can support lengthy play sessions.

"It's just the tech. Honestly, it's all tech. Our design is built around player comfort and immediacy; knowing your surroundings in the fantasy," says Willians, commenting on the sudden disappearance of motion sickness from VR games. "But it's the tech that's really helped us. We've got better resolution than we've ever had, we've got lower latency...it just removes that edge.

"People keep saying that player comfort is largely in the hands of the developers, and I totally agree with that. In terms of the motion sickness, there's absolutely none of that. If you were to barrel roll continually, you'll get dizzy; but guess what, if you stand here on the spot and spin three times you are going to get dizzy – that's not VR, that's just life."



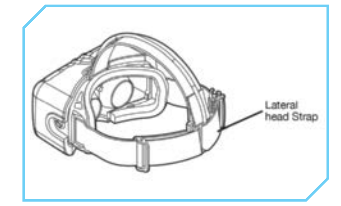


OCULUS'S KILLER INPUT IS MISSING AT LAUNCH

But how big of impact will it have?

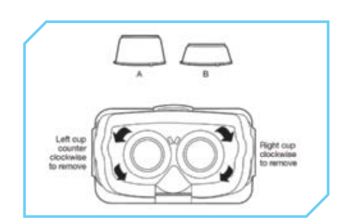
■ In a rush to meet the market first, Oculus Rift will be without its killer control input – Oculus Touch. Two wireless controllers that essentially function in a similar fashion to PlayStation Move or Nintendo's Wii Motes, Oculus Touch gives you a wildly immersive VR experience. The controllers – which look like a traditional gamepad split in half – allow you to reach out into virtual space, making hand gestures and interacting with objects directly.

We're disappointed to see the controllers miss the launch. It's this level of intuitive interaction that makes the HTC Vive so appealing. Having full control of your arms and hands in a 3D space is mind-blowing; the impact this style of control method has on the FPS genre – when paired with the positional tracker – is incredibly difficult to convey. The Oculus Touch controllers will go on sale later in 2016, though it's likely they will now be relegated to the unfortunate position of expensive luxury product.



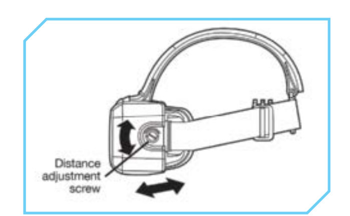
5 ADJUST THE STRAPS

Before you dive into any games, adjust the head straps. There's nothing more irritating than fiddling with them once you're already in-game. Make sure it's comfortable but secure; if you've not experienced VR before, you might be moving around more than you expect.



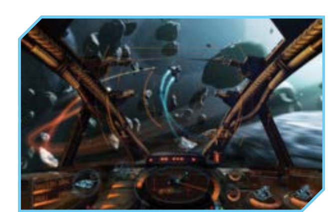
6 CHANGE OUT THE LENSES

Rift comes with two sizes of lens to help you get accustomed to the Rift technology. If you are long-sighted or have perfect vision, you'll want to use the taller set of lens. If you are visually challenged (nearsighted) you'll want to use the shorter pair.



7 DO YOU USE GLASSES?

If you need glasses to play games (or see) then you'll be happy to learn that there's no need to renew that contact lens subscription you loathe so much. Grab a coin and adjust the 'distance adjustment screw', now you can move the internal screens further from your eyes.

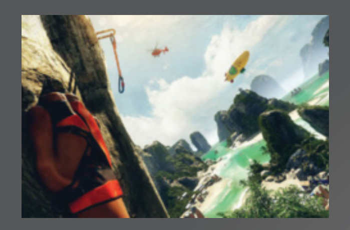


8 STEP INTO THE RIFT

If you've followed all of these steps and upgraded your PC properly, you will now be ready to step into the Rift. Launch a game from your desktop and you'll be whisked straight into the action, or go in blind and you'll find yourself at the Oculus Home storefront.

DAY ONE EXPECTATIONS

Early verdicts on the Oculus launch day offerings









THE CLIMB

If there's one thing we can say about a Crytek release with absolute certainty, it's that it's bound to look stunning. *The Climb* is no exception; Crytek's first venture into VR sees the Oculus Rift used to replicate a gorgeous (and stomach-churning) mountain ascension sequence; leaping across rocks in VR is terrifying enough to make your legs a little numb. *The Climb* has been designed as a competitive experience too, so be sure to get your friends together for some friendly death-defying competition.

EVE: VALKYRIE

Without question, *EVE: Valkyrie* will be VR's first blockbuster. We've had extensive time with *Valkyrie*, and were immediately impressed by the fast-paced dogfighter. It brings the battles of *Battlestar Galactica* to life, as you battle relentlessly against other players in beautifully-designed space areas. The look-to-lock targeting system – which has you track players with your heard movements in full 3D space – is a revelation. This is the game to play; the first system-seller of a new generation.

LUCKY'S TALE

While we still aren't sure how a third-person action game is going to hold up over lengthy playtime, we have been impressed with *Lucky's Tale* thus far. It's a cheerful platformer that's channelling the charm and whit of *Banjo-Kazooie*, only it's doing it in a lush virtual space. This one is coming bundled in with every sale of the Oculus Rift, so it's clear that Oculus deems it good enough to be an engaging experience for its hardware – this is likely the first game every owner will play.

ADR1FT

We've had our eyes on this one for so long now that we're only hoping this terrifying space thriller doesn't disappoint. Frequently referred to as 'Gravity: The Game', *Adr1ft* sees you caught alone in a ruined space station, doing your best to survive as the crushing darkness surrounds you. This might not be a horror game exactly, but we can't imagine much scarier than hearing your avatar slowly dying, gasping for breath as you struggle to find replacement oxygen tanks.

OCULUS RIFT THE FINAL VERDICT

Is it worth picking up a device at launch?

There's going to be a big, immediate buzz around virtual reality in the coming weeks. It's a huge deal, after all, and now you all finally have an opportunity to see what we've been raving about for years now. But it's good to keep things in perspective, and it's worth remembering that this is only the beginning of a very exciting time in our industry.

Being an early adopter has never been cheap – remember the first-gen iPhone? They launched at $499.99 with a two-year contract, before eventually inevitably dropping in price. Right now, the Rift is a premium, impressive piece of technology that has the potential to change the way we look at and interact with videogames. But it's also an experience that's launching with absent features – such as the highly touted Facebook social media integration and Microsoft Xbox One Cinema experience – but they will surely come in time.

If you're lucky enough to have a PC capable of running Oculus Rift, and you don't mind the lack of games currently available (over 100 titles are said to be launching before the end of 2016, though) then we can't recommend it enough. You'll be on the forefront of a gaming revolution – paying a pretty good price for a highly sophisticated piece of technology. If, on the other hand, you are concerned about upgrading your PC or worried about the amount of games available, then it might be worth waiting a few months – or opting instead for the PlayStation VR experience when that launches this Summer. But for now, you won't find anything else quite like the Oculus Rift: from KickStarter project to gaming revolution in four years, we can only begin to dream what comes next for the games industry.




THE ART OF
TOM CLANCY'S
THE DIVISION
THE ART OF
TOM CLANCY'S
THE DIVISION



WHY I ♥...

RIDGE RACER REVOLUTION

CHRIS ROBERTS, SENIOR DESIGNER, THREE FIELDS ENTERTAINMENT

“The game that has always just stuck with me is Ridge Racer Revolution*. It’s also the game that’s gotten me closest to a heart attack when playing it, and I think that’s a good thing. It gives you such a lovely place to drive, it’s just a lovely sunny day – driving down by the beach, with the seagulls, the water lapping.*

It was so hard as well, incredibly challenging when you go up against the White Angel car, you had to drive it via the rear-view mirror. It had a rhythm to it, you know, it was balanced. And from a geeky point of view, it could be played via Serial Link on PS1 and it would unlock (only for that mode) the original Ridge Racer *track. I remember going around to a friends’ house and we would just constantly spend all day trying to beat each other on that original* Ridge Racer *track.”*



"It's the game that's gotten me closest to a heart attack when playing it, and I think that's a good thing"

CHRIS ROBERTS, SENIOR DESIGNER, THREE FIELDS ENTERTAINMENT

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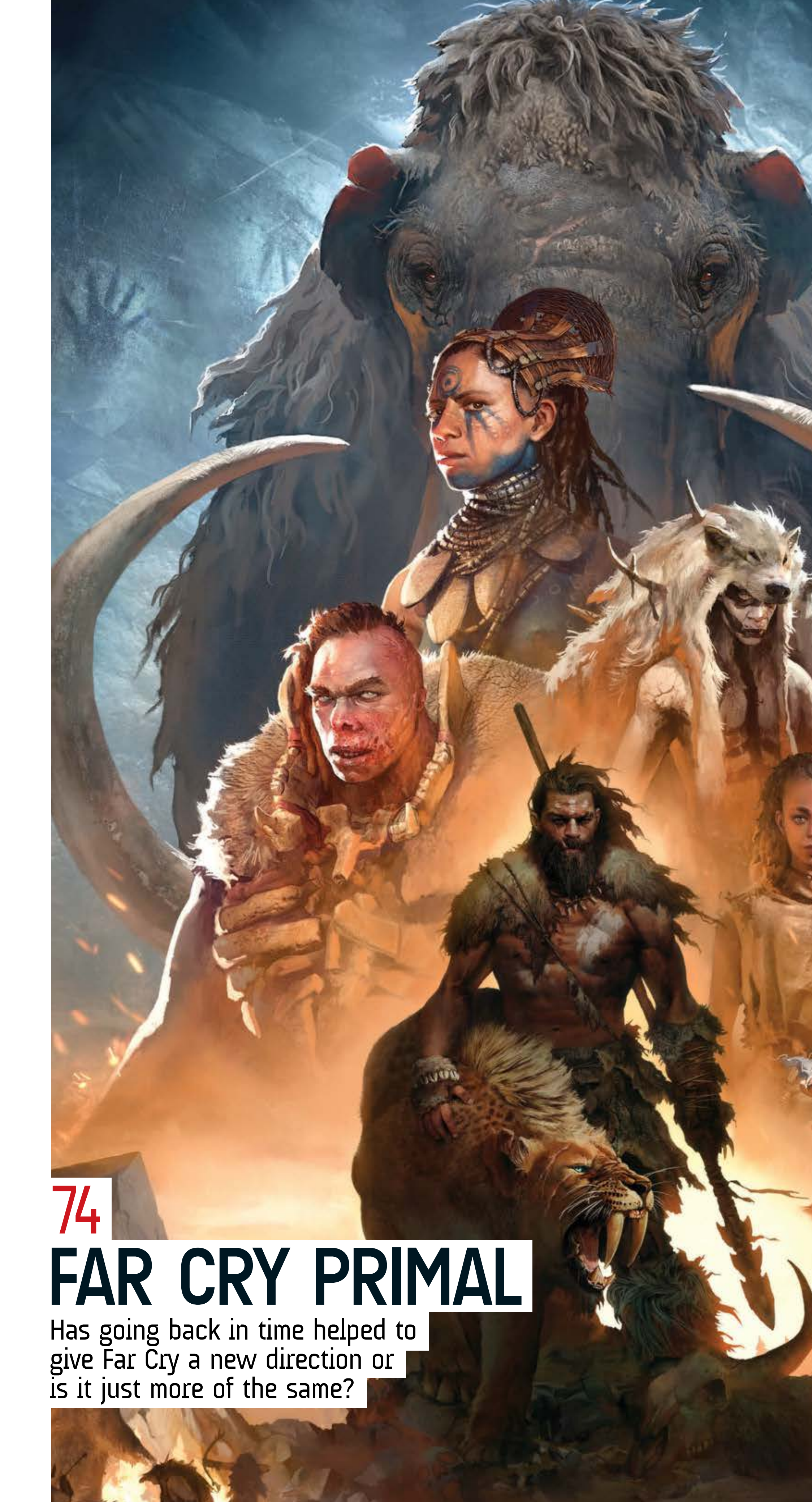


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74

FAR CRY PRIMAL

Has going back in time helped to give Far Cry a new direction or is it just more of the same?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

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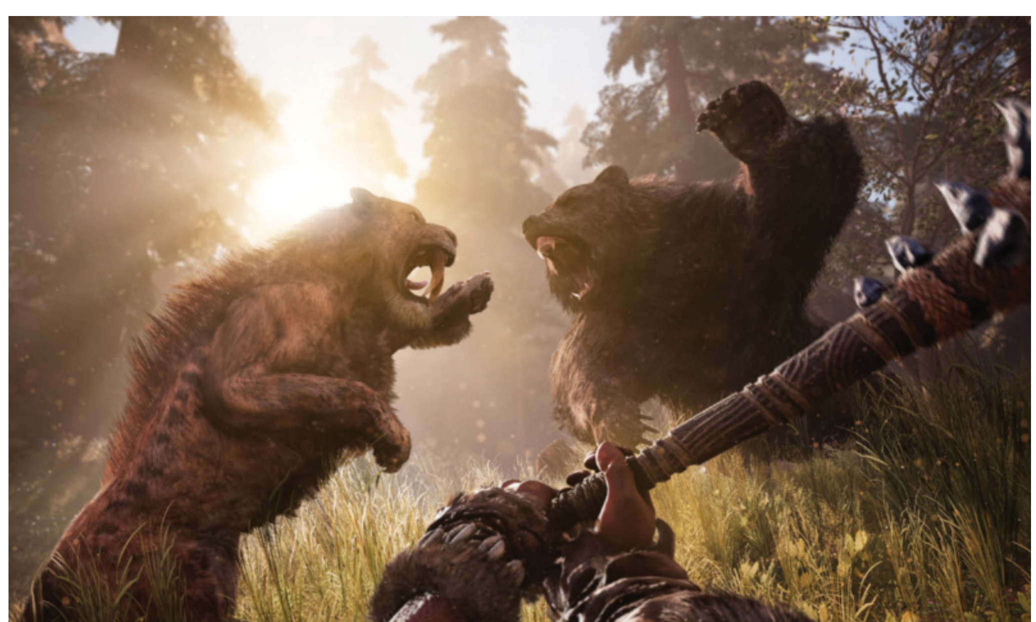

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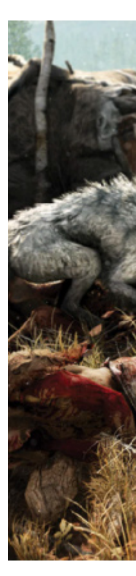

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EVEN WITH THE LACK OF TRADITIONAL WEAPONRY, EXPLOSIVES OR VEHICLES, THE GAMEPLAY AT THE CENTRE OF PRIMAL FEELS RESOLUTELY SIMILAR

AN ENTIRELY NEW LANGUAGE

We have a tendency to expect good work from Elias "I didn't ask for this" Toufexis, who has lent his talent to voicing caveman protagonist Takkar. Still, he misses the mark here – through no fault of his own, we must add. Ubisoft has gone to great lengths to create an authentic script, but in doing so it has failed to craft a fun story. The studio even brought in a pair of linguistics professors onto the project to craft three dialects (one for each of the tribes) based on the common ancestor of most modern European languages, Proto-Indo-European. It's impressive, though it's also constrained by the reality of the achievement; talking is relegated to a handful of characters, and even then it's limited to short sentences.





GIVE ME THE POWER OF MAN'S RED FLOWER

Far Cry Primal

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Montreal
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

***Far Cry* has never been a franchise afraid of evolution.** It has often felt like the dark horse of the Ubisoft family: free of expectation, open to experimentation, unshackled from the demands of annualisation. But for all of its freedom – in scope and design – the spectre of change forever looms. A franchise that once thrived on reinventing itself was quickly dragged to the guillotine; the stale similarities shared between *Far Cry 3* and *Far Cry 4* were a surprise disappointment, while the exhausting insanity of *Blood Dragon* is an enjoyable, if not entirely memorable, distraction. And so here we are with *Far Cry: Primal*. It feels like a desperate attempt on Ubisoft's part to challenge everything you thought you knew about *Far Cry* sequels and spin-offs.

Primal represented a chance for Ubisoft Montreal to reinvent the wheel. This could have, and probably should have, been an opportunity to refresh old mechanics, retire tired systems – without fear of upsetting the player base – and really strike ahead in a new and exciting direction. But, surprisingly, as it turns out, leaping 10,000 years into the past hasn't really changed much. *Primal* is a devolution of the core open-world loop that the Ubisoft Montreal has peddled to death – only now we're doing it all over again in the Stone Age.

Radio towers have morphed into bonfires; you light a beacon instead of rewiring the electronics; crafting and hunting is bigger than ever, searching for resources to craft makeshift weaponry is now key on your sprawling to-do list; and outposts are, well, still just outposts. Some things never change. Even with the lack of traditional weaponry, explosives or vehicles, the gameplay at the centre of *Primal* feels resolutely similar.

In many respects, it's almost as if Ubisoft Montreal has misunderstood the criticism so often levied at *Assassin's Creed* and its constant, banal attempts to reinvent itself, and blindly applied the same wayward logic to *Primal*. If consumers are growing tired and discontented with what's on offer in a game, a change of setting doesn't immediately, magically, fix the problem – if anything, it just accentuates it.

The opening hour of *Primal* highlights the disparity between the promise of the setting and reality of the product. Sixty minutes of gruelling survival sets a glorious stage.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

STONE AGE: The prehistoric setting does make for a nice change of pace, even if the mechanics haven't changed a great deal.

Left: *Primal* has difficulty curve problems throughout, which aren't helped by being able to tame mighty beasts. Once you get your supernatural mitts on a saber-toothed tiger or a bear, you'll likely encounter little resistance.

BETTER THAN
FAR CRY 2





WORSE THAN
FAR CRY 4

Above: Melee combat is disappointingly underdeveloped. There's little skill in using a club or spear; essentially it's just bashing until an enemy falls to the ground. The introduction of a block button would have at least brought some variety to combat.

Left: The hallucination moments of *Far Cry Primal* rank among some of the lowest moments of the game; they are painfully dull.

Groups of hunters stalk prey in packs, desperate for food to survive the week. Animals present a fierce and terrifying threat, immediately more dangerous than Pagan Min or his predecessor, Vaas. Locations must be scouted before night falls, fire pits crudely constructed within to keep warm, and, all the while, predators lurk in the shadows, eyes illuminated by the moon. But then the set dressing of this survival-sim collapses in front of your eyes; a clever façade designed to dazzle you.

Primal pulls a *Tomb Raider* on you – it gives you the impression that survival and struggle are at the heart of the experience ahead, when in reality it's just the ghostly apparition of what could have been, had the development been a little more brave. Open the world map and you'll find the usual: a litany of quest markers and points of interest, 20 hours' worth of mundane objectives hidden behind a fog of prehistoric war. The inventory screen is a gaping chasm, begging to be clogged up with herbs, woods, leather and rocks to forge upgrades and unlock skills.

FAQs

Q. FAR CRY MEETS TUROK?
Well, sort of. Except it lacks dinosaurs. And also guns. You know what? This is nothing like *Far Cry* meets *Turok*.

Q. WAIT, NO DINOSAURS?
Yep, seriously. Ubisoft has taken us back to pre-historic times and failed to deliver the one thing we really wanted, in the name of historical accuracy.

Q. WHAT CAN I DO THEN?
Well, you can ride a tiger, which is pretty badass – especially when storming an outpost with a flaming torch held high above your head.

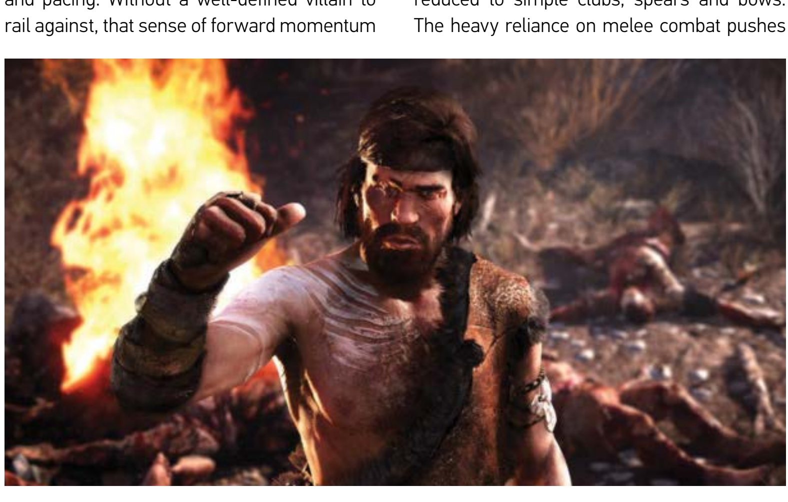


Right: With your access to spears limited, initially at least, your only option for ranged combat is with the bow. It feels as great to use here as it did in *Far Cry 4*, especially once you upgrade it to fire two arrows simultaneously.

Perhaps the biggest problem here is that the world of Oros is so legitimately stunning that so much of *Primal* feels like a missed opportunity. Moving between objectives is an exercise in banality. The worlds of *Far Cry* are always designed in such a way that you're forever in motion – always moving towards the next mission or item – but *Primal* seems to need the space for you to give it a moment of quiet appreciation, though that never arrives. Oros is one of the most striking worlds to ever come out of Ubisoft Montreal – a landscape twisted by nature, not man, and it deserves exploration – sadly, there's very little to do or find away from the paths you're supposed to be treading.

There's a lack of focus to the game's design and pacing. Without a well-defined villain to rail against, that sense of forward momentum that *Far Cry* usually maintains so well begins to stall. After the opening hour, the wildlife of Oros presents little threat. The rival tribes that staunchly hold territory are but moving stopgaps on your way to another map-expanding bonfire. We may have complained about the bombastic nature of the larger-than-life villains that inhabit *Far Cry* games in the past, but their presence is missed here; over-the-top bad guys are better than none at all.

There's too much familiarity in this foreign land, then, which is a shame because the setting could have done so much to revive flagging franchise interest. Take the pool of weapons at your disposal, for instance: it's noticeably smaller than any previous outing, and you'll find your offensive capabilities reduced to simple clubs, spears and bows. The heavy reliance on melee combat pushes





Above: The world of Oros is beautiful; this is without question one of the most gorgeous worlds Ubisoft has ever created.

Right: *Far Cry Primal* is a fun adventure, but it's also hugely disappointing. It fails to make great use of the setting, nor does it make any real attempt to progress mechanically. It's a wasted opportunity.



Below: Hope you like capturing outposts and radio towers (well, bonfires) because both return in *Far Cry Primal.*



WITHOUT A VILLAIN TO RAIL AGAINST, THE SENSE OF FORWARD MOMENTUM THAT FAR CRY USUALLY MAINTAINS SO WELL BEGINS TO STALL

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

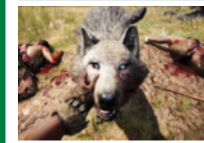
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



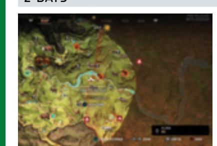
Hunting through the night is terrifying, as wolves creep and howl through the shadows, best bring a healthy helping of fire with you for safety.

10 HOURS



Once you begin to progress through the skill trees you'll be able to tame some incredibly powerful animals to aid you in your journey.

2 DAYS



At this point, you'll begin to hunt through every corner of the map looking for treasures and cave paintings to wrap up the last achievements.

BUILD A BETTER LIFE

Instead of hunting a big bad or overthrowing a nation, *Far Cry Primal* has a more considered approach to story that never really takes off. Your goal is to, essentially, build a settlement and then nurture it – with the Wenja people rebuilding their culture around your presence. This filters into a very basic new game system, which sees you tackling emergent missions out in the open-world and securing new Bonfires in an attempt to raise your population. This then filters down into specific gameplay rewards, as well as the opportunity for your people to gather rare and lucrative resources on your behalf. It's an interesting idea, but it has such little impact on the game that it'll likely go largely unnoticed.



you to abandon stealth and get up close and personal with your aggressors – be they angry tribespeople or feral animals – but it's mechanically simple to a fault. Your attacks are limited to light and heavy, governed by length of time you pull the trigger. There isn't even the ability to block, and so combat becomes just wildly swinging or prodding at enemies until they can be looted.

That said, combat can be avoided almost entirely once you unlock the ability to tame the creatures of Oros. This was supposed to be *Primal*'s big new feature, though it's actually proved to be a game-breaking distraction. Powerful creatures, such as cave bears or tigers, can be tamed as replacements for the modern weaponry you'd expect to see in any other *Far Cry* game. Only, X no longer forces a reload of your assault rifle, instead it now lets you pet your sabre-toothed tiger companion with a congratulatory ear scratch for displaying all of the ferocity of an AK-47.

Then there are the hallucinatory elements that swing between insane and frustrating. Flying across a warped landscape to gain a naturalistic control over an owl, that's fine with us. Dropping into the spirit realm – whilst riding a mammoth from a first-person POV, of course – and being forced to fend off wave and after wave of demonic ghost rhinos ad nauseam is not okay. *Primal* really is one of the most bizarre releases from the studio, and that works both for and against it throughout.

But through all of the disappointment and the missed opportunities, there's still the same sense of chaotic fun and wanton destruction at the heart of *Primal* that we've always loved about *Far Cry*. It has a fantastic sense of place and atmosphere, but that's constantly at war with the simplistic design, boring mission structures and utterly forgettable story.

There is potentially a lot of fun to be had in *Primal* – but that isn't enough this time. Without the draw of a maniacal villain to hunt, and without co-op or multiplayer to tug your attention away from the familiar explore-and-destroy gameplay loop, *Primal* doesn't provide any of the standout moments its predecessors have always peddled so successfully.

If only Ubisoft Montreal had felt more confident in its wild gambit – if only it had gone *further* with the Stone Age concept – and we could have been looking at something special. Instead, we have a *Far Cry* game that feels fun in its familiarity, but is sadly lacking in many integral ways.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CO-OP: Considering that effective hunters travelled in packs, the removal of co-op really hurts the overall experience here.

VERDICT

AN UNCONVINCING ATTEMPT TO REVITALISE THE FRANCHISE



gamesTMmag scored **6** for
Far Cry Primal
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

ZOMBIE SURVIVAL GOES OFF-ROAD

Dying Light: The Following

***Dying Light* stuck with us because of its sun-dappled, almost nostalgic look at an apocalypse that's yet to happen.** It made you feel safe, over-powered, almost *relaxed* during the nice daylight missions, but once night fell it was a mad scramble for survival. You'd scrape your shins getting up buildings, twist your ankle jumping from rafter to roof, but you needed to get gone, otherwise you'd never see that reassuring daylight again.

That's why *The Following*'s sprawling farmlands and sweeping open fields feel a little odd to us – it's a total sidestep from what the original game was in many ways, and initially we were nervous about setting foot in this infected new world. Something about that dense urban cluster of concrete and steel at least made us feel *safe*. Here, in *The Following*'s tropical backwaters, we were frightfully exposed.

This sense of slight dread is capitalised upon in the DLC's story. If you can get past the incredibly beige and all-round charisma hole that is protagonist Kyle Crane, there's a lot of atmosphere and almost-noir intrigue in *The Following*. It's self-contained – stepping away from some of the high drama that stumbled the vanilla game's pace – and despite a slow-burning start, a couple of blind twists and the whole conspirator angle is a fresh take on zombie fiction a lot of other media formats could learn from.

The pacing is better than the main game, too: you get to enter this realm with all your gear and skills intact, but you're not as over-powered as you might think. It also frees you up to explore more – there's no grind here, so you feel relatively confident wandering around, dispatching zombies whenever you *want* to, not because you *have* to. You'll be relying on guns/bows more, which is a shame, because the character animations and most satisfying moments in *Dying Light* have always rested in the melee combat. The lack of cover around the farmlands just

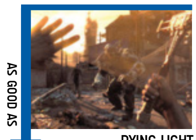
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: TechLand
PRICE: £34.99 (Enhanced Edition)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN — MAD MAX



AS GOOD AS — DYING LIGHT



Above: You're completely free to explore the new world of *The Following*.

Below: New weapons have been added to adjust to new environments in the game.



FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE LENGTH OF THE DLC?
We played for about 12 hours in total, but we didn't explore absolutely everything there was to see. It's a big ol' space!

Q. IS THERE STILL PARKOUR?
Absolutely, there just isn't as much Jackie Chan-inspired building hopping going on in here as there is in the original.

Q. HOW DOES THE DRIVING FEEL?
Good! It reminds us of *Far Cry 4* because of the forced first person view and tight controls, but we liked *Far Cry 4*.

Below: Prepare to have the bejesus scared out of you.



BLIND TWISTS AND THE CONSPIRACY ANGLE IS A FRESH TAKE ON ZOMBIE FICTION A LOT OF OTHER MEDIA FORMATS COULD LEARN FROM

makes that nigh-impossible, unfortunately. If it wasn't for the new tactical crossbow (better than *Far Cry*'s, on par with *Dishonored*'s), we'd have been left wanting.

The other main addition to your skillset here is a little buggy. This buggy works the same way as *Dying Light*'s weapons – it deteriorates during use. We scavenged enough parts to build new ones here and there, but we didn't really feel the need to go out of our way to level up the vehicle-devoted skill tree, especially since some of the car upgrades themselves seemed tied to a script. It's a nice mechanic, but a bit fluffy at times – exactly the same as the weapon system.

Driving around this post-apocalyptic countryside is fun, though: the world building that made Techland's first pass at *Dying Light* so good is held high and celebrated here, too: everything from little ad-hoc racetracks to cottages that tell an entire family's story without any human interaction whatsoever… there's a lot of things here Bethesda could learn from in its next open-world endeavour. Throw a couple of well-realised NPCs and a well-timed, leanly executed boss fight or two in the mix and the open world teems with threat.

Like any open world game, though, the expansive freedom you have to play and explore comes at the cost of bugs: a few times, we noticed the AI get jammed into a tree, or through a wall, or get *really* confused by a shin-high obstacle between us and them. Some of the quests devolve into 'go here, do this, come back' which is fine unless you die and respawn away from your buggy. The new map is also bigger than the main game's… but that just feels superfluous: we understand this expansion is about driving and exploration, but without the packed-out urban landscapes cluttering the horizon, it can feel decidedly empty.

If you're a fan of racing and the whole buggy side of *The Following*, though, you can play with three other players in online races – almost like *Mario Kart* meets *The Walking Dead* – and the whole kart-driven experience lends itself to a distinctive *Mad Max* feel. In fact, *The Following* is a better *Mad Max* game than the Warner Bros. effort that was released last year. If you had the character Max in place of Crane and his copy/paste personality, this little excursion into the zombified countryside would have been made even better.

As it stands, this is a good example of how to do a DLC package. *Dying Light* almost mimics its own skill tree in how its grown – opening up one whole new branch (driving) whilst adding a skill point or two to everything else it'd already set out on making great (zombie killing, level design, environmental storytelling, gunplay). Crane and the cookie-cutter quests aside, this approach to wrangling the undead in a countryside setting is tense, enjoyable and unnerving – a little like *28 Days Later* by way of *Mad Max*. That's not a bad thing, not a bad thing *at all*.

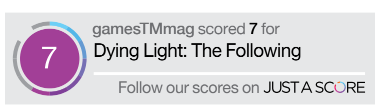
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

I WANT YOUR BRAAAAKES: The mix of kart action and zombie killing sprees – alongside all those perilous obstacles karting is known for – actually work really well together

VERDICT

DESPITE SOME BUGS, A SOLID GAME WITH GREAT FREEDOM



Crowd Control

With the emphasis very much on ranged combat in this expansion, you've got to adapt or die when it comes to taking on the moaning hoardes of the undead. You'll still have a couple of melee options when the shambling enemies get in close, but largely you'll have to take a pot shot or two, run back, gauge your options and act in the best interests of self-preservation. *Don't* be afraid of running away, and *don't* feel like you've got to kill everything you come across: sometimes living to see another sunrise is more attractive than getting a few extra experience points. One again, *The Following* is expanding nicely on the gameplay and themes of its mother-game, adding interesting mechanics and some excellent new tactical elements you need to consider.





Above: Artist Olly Moss has done a spectacular job designing the world of Firewatch. The woodland preserve is truly a location to revel in. You'll want to spend as much time as possible exploring and settling into its rhythms.

STANDING AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Firewatch

Run to your shelf, grab a book at random and blindly tear out an entire chapter. Oh, who are we kidding; nobody owns books anymore, do they? So put your Kindle down gently and consider this revised plan before you start gingerly ripping wires out: sprint down to your local Waterstones, grab a book at random, and blindly tear out an entire chapter – you may also want to calmly explain to the dismayed till attendant that this is in aid of *knowledge*. Read the crumpled pages with your weary eyes, and consider them for a moment. Did it make sense? How did it make you *feel*? Ultimately, were you frustrated or intrigued by the chapter-bound story?

There's a fine chance that following through with this exercise would leave you fairly confused; perhaps you'd glean an idea of the characters and motivations, but without wider context you're left wanting much more. *Firewatch* presents a similar quandary. From the outset you know very little about Henry, and yet developer Campo Santo asks that you empathise entirely with his situation. He's a man that's taken to living at the edge of the world – as we know it at least. Placed in self-imposed exile to deal with a personal tragedy, a brief text-based prologue hints towards a torrid life of dwindling returns, and so Henry ventures deep into the forest as a fire watchman. He's using physical loneliness to combat the emotional equivalent, and it's a powerful narrative tool.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Campo Santo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

LIFE ISN'T BOUND BY TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING RULES, SO WHY SHOULD A VIDEOGAME BE?

Powerful indeed, but it's not exactly unheard of in this era of game design. Much like fellow walking simulators *Gone Home*, *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter* and *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, *Firewatch* is made by a small team with a small budget – creating complex environments (inhabited by multiple characters) can be an expensive and time consuming proposition. And so *Firewatch* circumvents this limitation by doubling down on a sense of solitude. Without the distraction of others, you are forcibly immersed in a particular time and place. Alone, you are completely free to lose yourself in an atmosphere without distraction; free for your mind to drift and soak in all the tension.

To be clear: *Firewatch* isn't a horror game, but it racks up tension better than the best in the genre. For the majority of the four hours you'll spend entrenched in Campo Santo's

FAQs

Q. A GOOD DEBUT?

As far as first games go, Campo Santo couldn't have really done any better. *Firewatch* is a subversive walking simulator.

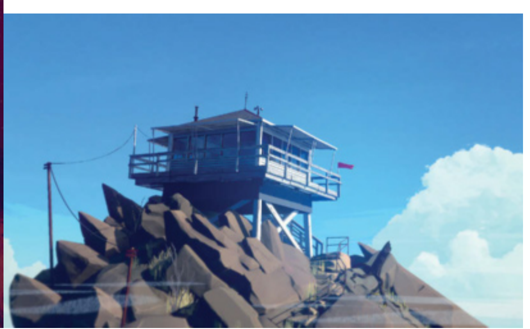
Q. VALUE FOR MONEY?

While it's only four hours long, you won't likely be disappointed by what you get out of the game.

Q. THE STANDOUT FEATURE?

Much of the game hangs on the dialogue, and Campo Santo did a fantastic job with the writing and hiring of solid voice actors.





Left: PC players will find a nice bonus waiting for them; an in-game camera can be found that lets you take photos, they can then be developed online and ordered as beautiful prints.



Below: The gameplay is limited, but exploring with a map and compass proves to be fairly engrossing. Even if you are directionally challenged, it's never too difficult to find your way.



gorgeous, sprawling woodland, you'll quickly find yourself deeply unsettled by the events that soon unfold. It becomes clear that your only form of human contact – or any contact with the outside world for that matter – is with a fellow-watchman, named Delilah, via a walkie-talkie. Much of your time will be spent exploring the growing relationship between the two lost souls over a summer – though it isn't long before mysterious and potentially dangerous circumstances begin to rear their ugly head.

Initially, you'll reach out and chat just to spare yourself from the life of mundanity found in Henry's day-to-day tasks. For the first hour or so you'll follow a reliable formula of heading out to solve woodland problems at the behest of Delilah; chasing down rebellious teens setting off fireworks or investigating a cut power line. You can call in at any time as you navigate the world with a map and compass; asking questions about the world around you, reporting indiscretions against nature. She too, can call in to you at any time, and more often than not Delilah is eager to provoke a reaction – she too brought baggage with her to the wild lands. There's clearly more to the relationship than meets the eye, and you'll be drawn into it immediately – the dialogue writing and voice acting is sublime, though we'd expect nothing less from a studio formed around ex-*Telltale* developers, famed for their work on *The Walking Dead: Season One*.

Campo Santo cleverly plays on the illusion of time. While you are free to explore artist Olly Moss' beautifully serene forest as you please – and will be eager to photograph some of the more stunning environments – the reality of your situation forces you into strange behavioural patterns. You'll start calling into Delilah to ease discomfort, just to hear a human voice over the rustling of branches and howls of wind in the night.

It's this discomfort that ultimately brings *Firewatch* together. The interactions between Henry and Delilah are often witty and riddled with sarcasm, but there's always the sense you are both on the razor's edge. When the mysterious behaviour in the forest starts to become erratic, you will be labouring over dialogue reactions and responses. It's possible to piss Delilah off to the point where she will want to 'cool off', leaving you totally and utterly abandoned. It's a terrifying feeling, being truly alone – and it's a crux of the human condition *Firewatch* orbits constantly.

While there's a lot of joy to be found in the character drama, your lasting impression will likely be informed by how you receive the ending. It's difficult to really know if *Firewatch* is trying to say something more, or whether it's simply aspiring to give you a snapshot into a small part of someone's life. *Firewatch* feels like a vignette of Henry's life, rather than a defining moment in it. It's an intimate character piece that just so happens to be told in the videogame medium; how content you are reading a chapter from a larger piece will likely define how much enjoyment you glean from the experience. Life isn't bound by traditional storytelling rules, so why should a videogame? *Firewatch* is a brief but enjoyable experience set in a stunning and lovingly crafted environment, but there is no real ending – there's simply the place where you stopped reading the story.

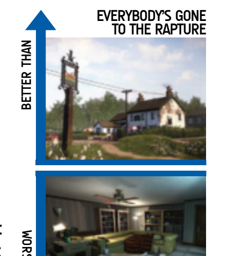
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

RUSHED ENDING: More time could have been spent on building towards the ending. It's the rushed nature of it that makes it so divisive.

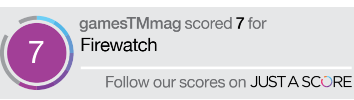
PS4 LAUNCH PROBLEMS

Disappointingly, the PS4 launch of *Firewatch* was riddled with performance problems. For a game that has you navigating forests, climbing rocky hills and admiring the view, a plummeting frame-rate was pretty unacceptable. Thankfully, the game has been patched, bringing it in line with the PC release. It's a shame that Campo Santo thought it was acceptable to release *Firewatch* in this condition, especially as it isn't a game that really inspires a second play through. That said, it is well worth diving back in now without the fear of motion sickness cropping up to spoil your fun.



VERDICT

A BEAUTIFUL AND THOUGHTFUL GAME WITH A CONTENTIOUS ENDING





Some of the game's better puzzles involve using your yarn to create pulley systems. You can tie knots to certain parts of the scenery to fix parts of your wool there, making it easier to put together pulleys like this.

YARNY'S WOOLLY WORLD

Unravel

When *Unravel* was thrust into the limelight and ultimately stole the show at EA's E3 2015 conference, it set a level of expectation that was always going to be difficult to meet. While the finished game certainly reaches this level in terms of emotion and sentiment, it doesn't quite manage it when it comes to puzzle platforming. You play as Yarny, a little red woolly character who's been tasked with exploring a range of picturesque Swedish landscapes in an attempt to find memories from the past. Along the way the game tries everything in its power to tug on your woolly little heartstrings, and there are moments that may have you choking up if you're the sentimental type.

Unfortunately, these aren't the only emotions *Unravel* is likely to evoke as you play. Some others – most notably frustration – also fight their way to the surface as you struggle with the game's numerous fiddly puzzles, many of which make use of the slightly unpredictable physics engine. Most of the puzzles revolve around Yarny and his woolly body. As he progresses through each level he unravels, leaving a trail of wool behind him which can be tied to obstacles to create makeshift platforms, pulleys, trampolines and the like. You have to be considerate and sparing with your wool, though: if you don't keep topping yourself up by picking up spare wool dotted around each stage you risk reaching a point where you can go no further and have to backtrack.

By the time you're only a couple of levels into the game these woolly puzzles start to show signs of fiddliness. Many of the more physics-based ones result in annoying trial-and-error experiments or occasional accidental death as objects don't quite line up or you don't jump off your wool trampoline with just the right timing. Elsewhere, a selection of irritating enemies provide a series of puzzles in which failure results in a frustrating one-hit kill, similar to the likes of *Limbo* and *Max And The Curse Of Brotherhood*.

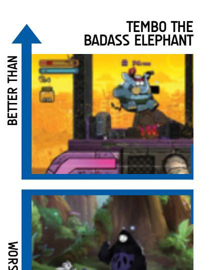
It can't be denied that given developer Coldwood Interactive's history of forgettable skiing and PlayStation Move games, *Unravel* is a superb effort. Indeed, it might be because it looks like a big-budget triple-A game that its imperfect gameplay – usually expected and accepted with indie games – feels so disappointing in this case.

It isn't always bad news. When it all comes together – and it often does – *Unravel* is an adorable game with a charming soundtrack and some gorgeous background environments. There's still a sense of satisfaction each time you solve a puzzle and Yarny's animations are enough to warm your heart. It's just a shame that the game's myriad frustrating moments ensure this warm heart is accompanied by heat under the collar.



FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Coldwood Interactive
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

TEMBO THE BADASS ELEPHANT



ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

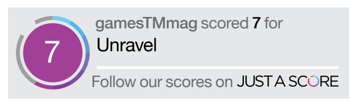
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WASTING AWAY – As you proceed through a stage and Yarny continues to unravel he gets noticeably thinner. It's an interesting way of showing how much wool you have left instead of a standard energy bar

VERDICT

ITS PUZZLES FRUSTRATE FOR THE WRONG REASONS



ALAN TITCHMARSH HAS GOT HIS WORK CUT OUT

Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2

Right: Online games are pretty standard fare – deathmatch, capture the flag, etc – but you also have, in the spirit of the original *Plants Vs. Zombies* mobile game, a co-op wave defence mode. You can play it solo, too, but with a pal it's much better

Below: Citron, a giant orange with a cannon attached, is one of the strongest characters on the plants' team. His closest counterpart in the zombie camp is Captain Deadbeard, a peg-leg pirate zombie armed with rockets and a pistol

DETAILS

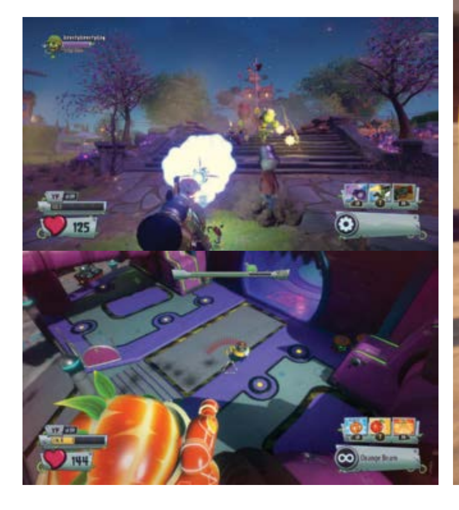
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: PopCap Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-24
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: Switching back and forth between plants and zombies is basically seamless, and each side offers its own unique rewards and missions. For our money, the plant missions are better, as are the characters

Aside from listing off all its new features, it's hard to know what to say about *Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare 2.* If you've played the first, this is more of the same, albeit with extra missions, characters, collectibles and so on. Moreover, if you've played any third-person shooter, period, you won't be surprised. All of the compliments *Garden Warfare 2* deserves – competent, smooth, big – feel like backhanded insults. If you're looking for something thought-provoking, or a game that's going to linger in your imagination after you've finished playing, *Garden Warfare 2* is not it.

That's not to say it's half-hearted. PopCap, who could have easily stuck to producing mobile games, has taken a risk moving to big console development, and away from puzzle and strategy mechanics. Any studio prepared to take on new challenges is worth plaudits, and *Garden Warfare 2* represents a willingness to experiment too rarely seen in videogaming. And it's not like PopCap hasn't pulled it off. Certainly, this is the game the studio wanted to make and on top of all the rigorously tweaked combat modes and balanced multiplayer fights there's a lot of visual flair: characters are varied and amusing and the levels are very colourful. This is the game PopCap wanted to make. It's just that it's very boring.

Garden Warfare 2 is a time sink. Its innocent, playful visage does little to disguise that what it really wants from you is more: more time, more commitment, more enthusiasm about collecting in-game junk and useless points. If you sat down to play this on your phone while waiting for a train, or just idly killing time, that'd be fair enough. But it's a big console game, and in an era when big console games, generally, are trying to do new things. Perhaps *Garden Warfare 2* deserves to be met more on its own terms – if a good game is a game that



Below: Backyard Battleground is a new open-world, replacing the menu screen of the original *Plants Vs. Zombies*. From here you can access new quests and combat minigames



EVERY MULTIPLAYER GAME AWARDS YOU MORE POINTS AND MORE GEAR



FRESH FRUIT DAILY

Garden Warfare 2 is updated with new quests every 48 hours so there's plenty to be getting on with. But these added missions and their objectives quickly get repetitive. Kill X amount of enemies. Win a deathmatch. Find some collectibles. They're emblematic of a greater problem in *Plants Vs. Zombies*: once the initial novelty wears off the game quickly becomes a grind. This is a third-person shooter but it inherits from its mobile-based predecessor awful fixations on statistics and number-crunching. It feels like a game that's never supposed to end. Those added missions, though a nice idea, are just extra, useless holes into which to pour your time.

achieves precisely what its creators intended, *Plants Vs. Zombies* certainly makes the grade. But there's something ugly about how games of this ilk play out, something patronising and cynical about its structure, and its fixation on acquisition and levelling up. You accept a mission, you kill X amount of enemies, you unlock some more points and power-ups, you do another mission. Every couple of days PopCap adds more objectives and collectibles. Every multiplayer game awards you more points and more gear. It's an endless cycle – do more, get more, do more. And there's no narrative substance, not even much humour, to keep things interesting. You shoot, you get, you shoot again. This is what you've done in hundreds of other videogames. When you play *Garden Warfare 2* you are, very literally, just wasting time.

But it certainly works and if a successful sequel is one that addresses the problems of the original whilst adding more 'content', *Garden Warfare 2* certainly steps over that very low bar. Kernel Corn, a heavy weapons-style corn on the cob is a new addition to the Plants' cast of characters as is Rose, a magic wielding flower that can turn enemies into goats. The Zombies get: Super Brainz, a melee character; the Imp, a quick, low health troublemaker who, if he lives long enough, can spawn in a powerful robot; and Captain Deadbeard, a pirate zombie equipped with a pistol. The characters can also be customised using card packs, which are purchased using in-game currency.

FAQs

Q. WHO'S THIS AIMED AT?
Kids will love it. Strategy players and shooter fans might find it a little light – it's stuck in between both genres.

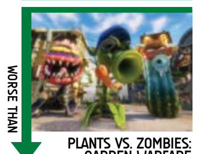
Q. WHAT'S DIFFERENT ON CONSOLE?
Garden Warfare is a big jump for PopCap. Some of the strategy mechanics from the mobile series are still present but this, essentially, is a third-person shooter.

Q. IS IT FUNNY?
Yes, but not as much as it could be. Some of the characters will raise a smile, but the levels and set-ups are bland and repetitive.

SUNSET OVERDRIVE

AS GOOD AS

WORSE THAN



PLANTS VS. ZOMBIES: GARDEN WARFARE

Played with 24 people, *Garden Warfare 2*, again, works perfectly fine. Everything is breezier and faster paced than your typical online shooter and the focus, rather than rugged competition, is on knockabout fun. You dip in and dip out – the monotony of *Garden Warfare*'s thin single-player missions is nicely broken up by a couple of games of capture the flag. However, the mulitplayer modes can also be played solo against AI enemies, and this is *Garden Warfare 2*'s biggest selling point over its predecessor. PvP is fun, but in solo deathmatches you can add weapon and behaviour modifiers and really stir things up. Setting the match to double speed is pretty self-explanatory, as is turning off reloads, but if you switch both of those on (and a physics modifier which means every time you get shot you go flying halfway across the map) you've finally – after treading through *Garden Warfare 2*'s undercooked campaign and multiplayer modes – got an interesting fight on your hands. The Garden Ops (or Graveyard Ops) missions – traditional wave defence against increasingly tough opponents – are fun also. Again you can play them either co-op or solo, and it's during the latter rounds that *Garden Warfare 2*'s design really starts to shine. Taken alone or in small, uniform groups, as in the campaign missions, the enemies feel like cannon fodder. But when they attack in combinations, a batch of Imps coupled with a squad of Super Brainz, for example, you can see how much work PopCap has put into balancing its game and creating systems that allow for varied battles and setpieces.

MISSING LINK

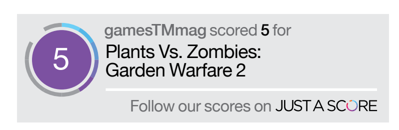
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BRAINS, BRAINS: *Garden Warfare 2* is such a colourful world, full of big characters and wacky ideas, but the levels themselves lack flair. They're thoughtless and humdrum, less like distinctive missions and more like extra "content." It's a shame.

Despite its pretty environments and swollen production value, *Garden Warfare 2* feels a lot like its smartphone cousins, less a videogame, in the noble sense, and more a tar pit, swallowing down your time and providing little in return but useless virtual tat.

VERDICT

FUNNY BUT FOCUSED ON 'CONTENT' RATHER THAN IDEAS



POTENT YET UNEVEN HORROR

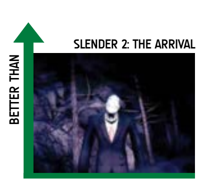
Layers Of Fear

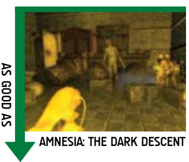
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Aspyr
DEVELOPER: Bloober Team SA
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

SLENDER 2: THE ARRIVAL





AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT

AS GOOD AS

Jump scares are all well and good when it comes to building the ultimate horror masterpiece, but it's that sense of intangible foreboding that can really crawl under your skin and be the end of you – an air of creeping dread that shreds your nerves and turns grown adults into gibbering wrecks. That's not to say *Layers Of Fear*, the latest offering from Polish studio Bloober Team, is free of classic leaping frights but it's in that thick, viscous air of hallucinogenic terror that it really flexes its malformed fingers best.

The similarities to genre darling *P.T.* are here with a seemingly endless cycle of doors and ever changing rooms, but it's actually got more in common with psychedelic horror trips such as *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*. Chambers warp and paintings take on unnerving bestial qualities while whispers build like a morose hum in the background – they even hiss out of your DualShock 4's speaker if you're playing on PS4 – it all adds to a sense of decaying sanity that works far better than the traditional 'hide from the monster' shtick overused in the likes of *Outlast*.

As an artist struggling with a nasty dose of creative block, you navigate a *Resi*-aping Victorian mansion, complete with Gothic stylings, and classical painting motifs. It's an enticing combination that offers a different flavour of horror to your usual abandoned asylums, it's just a shame *LOF* seems so quick to finish up its own experience. Save for a few obtuse puzzles in the closing half hour or so, it's all over in barely two and a half hours. With its machine gun approach to scares and psychological warfare, you end up wishing *LOF* would spread its ideas over a larger canvas and take its time with those crimson brush strokes. There's also a bizarre overly-weighted feel to navigation that's clearly meant to emulate the natural sway of walking, but ends up making movement feel like a chore.

If anything, *LOF* can, well, layer it on a little thick. Once it gets going, the game pummels your senses at every turn. In those opening hours, it's a delicious onslaught that leaves you breathless with its slew of shifting shadows, creepy dolls and ghostly encounters, but after it while the ferocious barrage starts to lose its potency. It also doesn't help that *LOF* often recycles many of its ideas as you attempt to complete your macabre artistic masterpiece.

What you're left with is a short slice of horror that's got a few genuinely brilliant ideas up its bloody sleeve, but one that dulls the edges of its own experience with a lack of subtlety. Still, *LOF*'s brilliant setting and premise oozes with a Gothic, MR James-esque ambiance that will shred your nerves like a clock-watching ripper.

FINGERPRINT

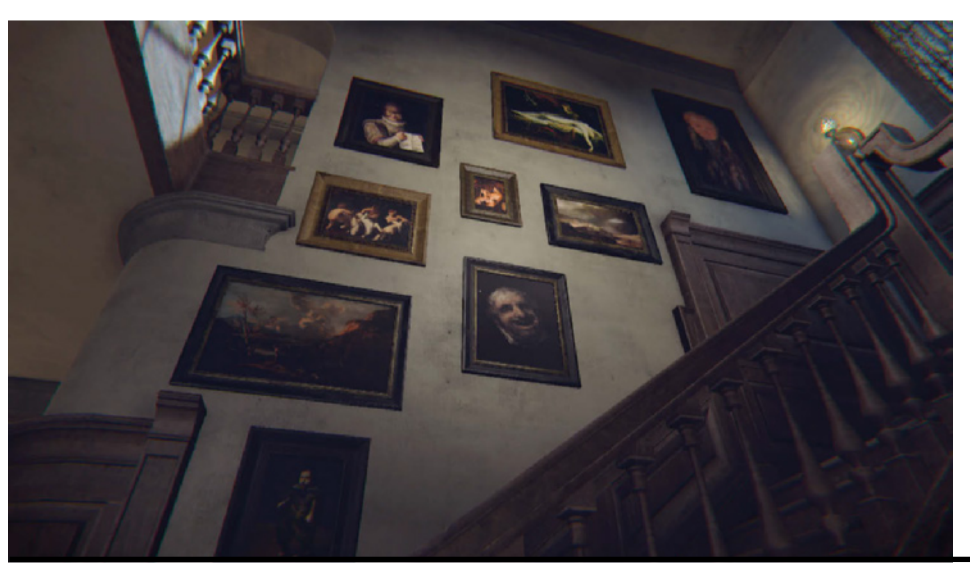
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

AESTHETIC: Using portraiture and classical painting styles as a device for horror, with the corruption of the familiar and the almost-psychedelic twisting of reality gives *LOF* a hellish sheen.



Above: It's sluggish movement aside, *LOF* is an attractive experience. The lighting in particular – candles flickering and flashes of lightning – adds an extra dimension to your psychological trip.

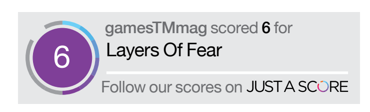






VERDICT

CREEPY LOCATION, POOR PACING





Right: Some levels are shrouded in darkness, and introduce lighting effects. These areas are infested with rats, but flames and explosions light up the dark.

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW LOVE-HATE ADDICTION

Nuclear Throne

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Mac, Linux, PS4, PS Vita, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Netherlands
PUBLISHER: Vlambeer
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: Windows XP, 1.2Ghz+ CPU, 1024MB RAM, 256MB GPU, 200MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

***Nuclear Throne* is psychological torture in game form.** All it wants to do is punish you, yet you'll keep coming back for more. It's like reeling at the smell of a particularly pungent cheese, but you can't help but have just one more sniff.

Nuclear Throne is a super fast-paced, top-down twin-stick shooter in which you get just a single life to reach the end. A 'Roguelike' of sorts, if you die, it sends you back to the first level. And the stages are randomly generated, so forget being able to memorise all of the enemy positions, bullet patterns and perfect sight lines. Every time you have a go at reaching the *Nuclear Throne* – the eponymous end-game reward – you'll be facing unknowns at every turn. It's brutal. And it's absolutely brilliant.

You pick your Mutant character at the start of your run, each one boasting their own unique perks and abilities. What's especially interesting here is that, unlike most games in which character variations amount to little more than differing levels of health, armour or attack power, in Nuclear Throne the numerous character abilities fundamentally change the way you play.

The initial character, Fish, has an evasive roll move, which is relatively uninspiring compared to the Mutant 'Melting', who can make the corpses of downed enemies explode, allowing for sophisticated kill-chain techniques. Or the Mutant 'Rebel', who can sacrifice hit points (HP) to spawn an AI-controlled ally.

As the enemies grow in number and ferocity, you too get more powerful. You'll ditch your basic pistol and shotgun for grenade launchers, laser pistols, flame throwers and the awesome crowd-wrecking Flak Cannon. You also level up, letting you choose a 'Mutation' with each level. Mutations are perks which also have profound effects on the game, such as the ability to slow the movement of enemy bullets or introduce randomised HP boosts with each kill. Then you die and it's all gone.

Besides the insane twitch skill that you gradually acquire as a player, *Nuclear Throne* calls for an understanding of its many systems. And this offers the game a level of depth, strategy and, in turn, longevity, that you wouldn't typically expect from a simple-looking twin-stick shooter. Add to that numerous gameplay-changing secrets to explore, a two-player co-op option, and timed events that ditch randomly-generated levels in favour of fixed stages, and *Nuclear Throne* – a mere 156MB install – blossoms into a behemoth of a game.

Nuclear Throne is Vlambeer's best work yet. It's wonderful, evil, gorgeous, horrible, satisfying and merciless. You might hate its lack of checkpoints, or bad levels spawns that almost instantly kill you. It doesn't care. Screw you. It hates you. But you'll love it.

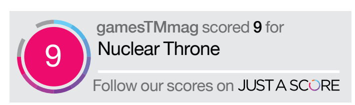
WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

TIMELY EVENTS: Bonus Weekly and Daily modes offer fixed levels and a pre-selected character. Since everyone's playing the exact same thing, leaderboards are added where you can track your mad skills.



Above: Developer Vlambeer has earned itself a reputation for enriching what appear to be simplistic game ideas with astonishing depth and design. *Nuclear Throne* exemplifies this with intricate, multi-layered strategy.

VERDICT
SETS A NEW BENCHMARK FOR TWIN-STICK SHOOTERS



ASSASSIN'S OF THE WORLD UNITE

Assassin's Creed Chronicles: Russia



If it's going to continue the *Assassin's Creed* series can learn a lot from *Chronicles: Russia.* A 2.5D platformer in the vein of Mark of the Ninja, it strips away so much of the clutter that slows down the mainline *Assassin's* series. You don't have as many gadgets, or skills. And the typically useless free-running mechanic is now simple climbing and jumping – there are still plenty of moments where you'll fumble and fall, but *Chronicles: Russia* is much more graceful than 3D outings like *Syndicate*.

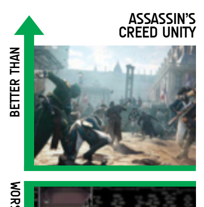
Best of all, it dispenses with the typical *Assassin's Creed* screen clutter. There are fewer pop-ups, no blinking, shrieking exclamation marks above guards' heads and less of the encyclopedia pages, nagging to be read. The common failing of *Assassin's Creed* is that, despite its stealthy premise, missions often degenerate into fighting and killing dozens of people, using clunky combat mechanics. *Chronicles: Russia* is leaner and more straightforward - on occasion, it feels like *Assassin's Creed* as it was always meant to be.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4, PS Vita
ORIGIN: Britain
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Climax Studios
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY



WORSE THAN



MARK OF THE NINJA

But it's still a mess. Especially after the opener, when you're introduced to your second playable character, and it becomes a kind of single player co-op game, like *Resident Evil Zero* or *Brothers*. You'll find yourself having to restart time and time again as the finicky controls and fussy systems sabotage your plans. It is a very disapproving game. It offers you little tricks – climb over guards with your grappling gun, distract them with a ringing telephone – and suggests you'll use them to formulate your own strategies. But in practice, unless you follow a very strict, narrow path and execute every move exactly as the game intends, you're scuppered. Rather than think for yourself, or master your tools, you have to just keep dying and restarting until work out that path. It has less litter, but often descends into the same shambolic stop-start farce as the bigger *Assassin's Creed* games.

MISSING LINK

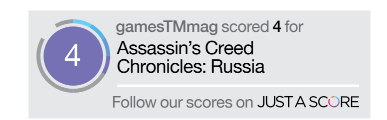
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

EVEN FLOW The stuffiness and over-engineering in Assassin's Creed is largely dispensed by Chronicles, but it is still finicky. You're forced to restart almost every encounter until you do it exactly as it demands

And the writing is awful. *Chronicles: Russia* illustrates clearly how the series uses historical context as window dressing, presented blithely and barely. It seems the designers are interested simply in visual splendour. The buildings and backgrounds in have a distinctly Soviet aesthetic, which might be a little early given that the Russian Revolution had only taken place the year before. Like the other *Assassin's Creed* games, its representation of history is largely just affectation. *Chronicles: Russia* ultimately feels half-hearted and lacks consistency.

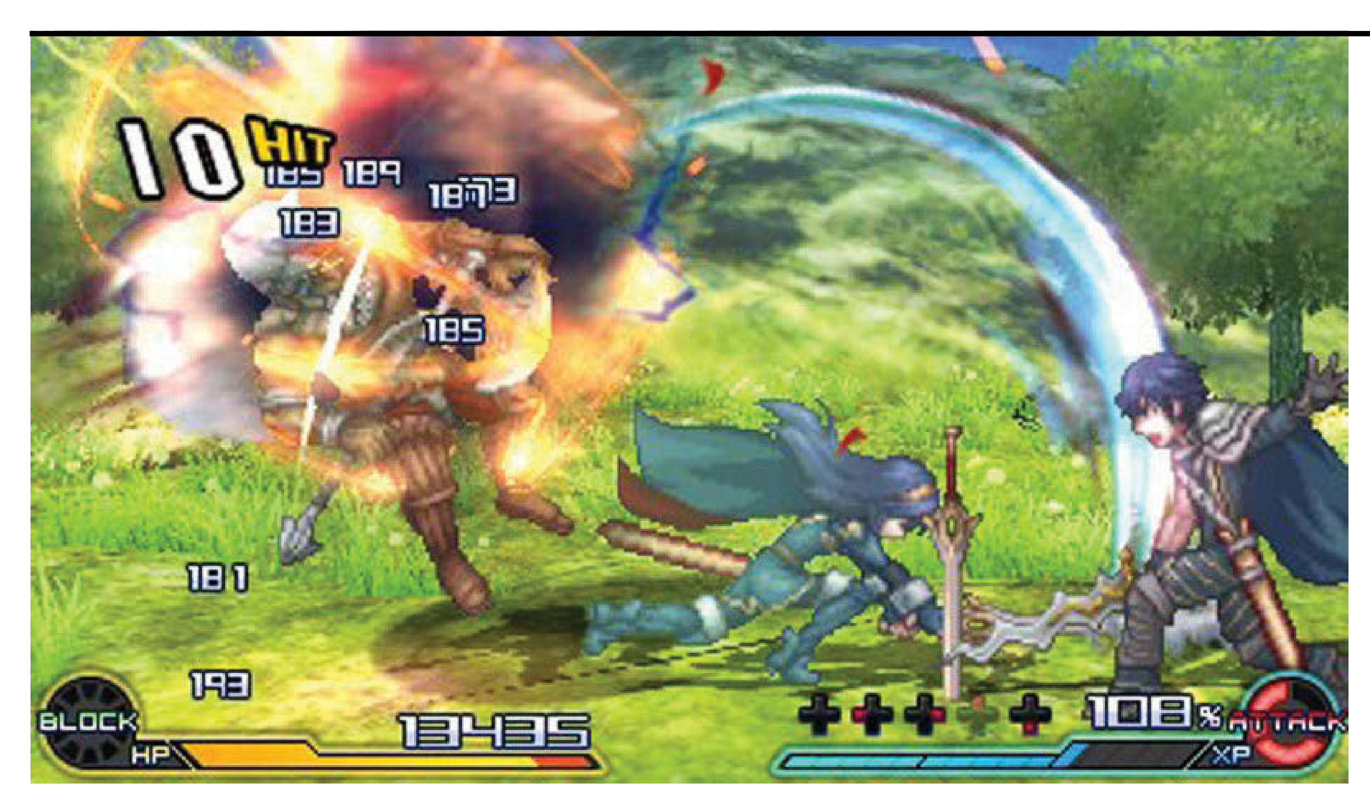
VERDICT

AN OFFHAND EFFORT THAT ADDS LITTLE TO THE SERIES





Pedantic history note, but *Chronicles: Russia* features the famous hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union even though it wasn't adopted until 1923.



X GONNA GIVE IT TO YA

Project X Zone 2

Above: Not content with letting Sega, Capcom and Bandai Namco characters team up, Nintendo characters get in on the action too. Chrom and Lucina from *Fire Emblem* turn up as a playable pair unit, and Fiora from *Xenoblade Chronicles* appears alongside *Xenosaga*'s KOS-MOS.

If the original *Project X Zone* wasn't enough to scratch your crossover itch, this sequel offers more of the same. Those hoping for massive changes to its predecessor's basic gameplay, though, will remain disappointed, as *Project X Zone 2* doubles down on the hope that its character interactions make up for the lack of depth.

As before, the plot is nonsensical. A bunch of portals have started appearing all over Japan and it's up to a group of heroes from different dimensions and eras of time to join forces and defeat the evil responsible. This is little more than a plot device used to explain the weird and wonderful interactions between Capcom, Sega and Bandai Namco characters.

It's here where *Project X Zone* is at its best, offering fanfiction levels of crossover nonsense with returning characters like Heihachi from *Tekken*, Chris & Jill from *Resident Evil* and Ryu & Ken from *Street Fighter* joined by new faces like Phoenix Wright, Axel from *Streets Of Rage* and Ryo from *Shenmue*. Nintendo even enters the fray this time around as characters from *Fire Emblem* and *Xenoblade* turn up to expand the roster.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: Monolith Soft
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

PROJECT X ZONE



WORSE THAN

FIRE EMBLEM AWAKENING

The localisation work here is tremendous, especially given the sheer number of characters and possible interactions. The 'fish out of water' trope is used to its fullest throughout, leading to some genuine laugh-out-loud moments as each unexpected encounter plays out. The more obscure your retro gaming knowledge, the more you'll get out of this, as all manner of references are dropped with alarming regularity. Even one-time Japanese Sega Saturn TV ad mascot Segata Sanshiro arrives as a playable character at one point.

Where the game excels in its dialogue and fan service, however, it falters slightly in its tactical gameplay. As with the original, *Project X Zone 2* feels like it's been designed for players who are relatively new to tactical RPGs, drawn in by the crossover aspect but perhaps worried about the complexity of the genre. There isn't much depth beyond assigning solo characters to pairs and applying certain items. As such the majority of battles will be easily won on your first attempt, and it's only as the game approaches its final chapters that the difficulty level begins to slightly increase.

This isn't necessarily a problem: for those not well-versed in strategy – or those who are but just want a game where they can switch their brain off – there's plenty of spectacle here, with a timing-based combat system and even more screen-filling moves supported by incredible sprite work. Just be aware that if you're expecting a massive challenge, like you'd get in some of the games these characters have come from, you're still going to find yourself waiting for it by the time the credits are rolling. Light and amusing, but not offering much more.

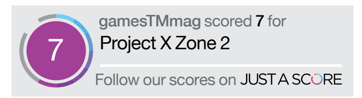
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CROSSPEDIA: *Project X Zone 2* has an enormous encyclopedia covering every character, enemy and organisation in the game. With over 30 franchises featured in some way, it's a great addition.

VERDICT

NO MASTERPIECE, BUT CAPTIVATING



CRY ME A RIVER

The Flame In The Flood

The world is against you – that's something you've got to understand early on in *The Flame In The Flood* if you want to survive. On our first run, we got four days in (and five miles downstream) before we died of dehydration, and dysentery, coughing our lungs up on the mangled remains of our raft, drifting headfirst into broiling rapids.

It's a survival roguelike – a procedurally generated adventure through America's flooded heartlands. Once you master the basics – keeping warm, keeping dry, getting yourself fed, keeping a decent water supply – you can start making progress. This isn't a game about exploration, it's about progress: if you stop off at every camp, plundered hospital or crumbling hardware store, you're going to get mauled by wolves or set upon by boars. Trust us, we suffered many a laceration and broken bone from *those* urban pests.

Instead, you're going to want to stock up – make some snares, kill some rabbits, cook their meat – and head on. If you keep stopping off, two things will happen: firstly, you'll encounter more things that exist only to kill you (ants, poison ivy, dodgy water supplies et al), and secondly; you'll see right through the game's fairly scant offering of mechanics.

DETAILS

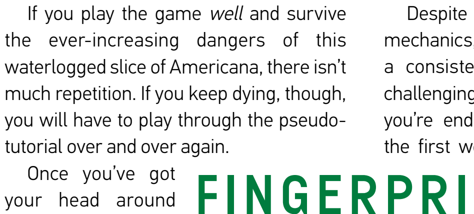
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: The Molasses Flood
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A




If you play the game *well* and survive the ever-increasing dangers of this waterlogged slice of Americana, there isn't much repetition. If you keep dying, though, you will have to play through the pseudo-tutorial over and over again.

Once you've got your head around the mechanics, the learning curve isn't bad: you start crafting traps, catching prey, using predators to do your dirty work. You learn to pilot your makeshift barge – hell, you might even get yourself a nice little floating home. But you've got to prioritise.

Even if it's going well (and that never really lasts for long), you'll still battle with the inventory: it's tight, and while you can transfer things to your ever-loyal canine Aesop, or even upgrade your pack, this is a game of micro-managing your survival.



FINGERPRINT

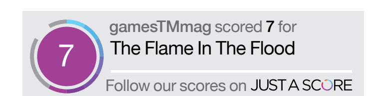
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DOG DAYS: If you happen to die, you can give Aesop a selection of your belongings in your dying breath – ready for him to give to your next character.

Despite some skinniness in the core mechanics, this is a strong game with a consistently charming aesthetic and challenging progression-based system: if you're enduring enough to live through the first week or so, you'll meet a slew of survivors, and you'll uncover a glimpse of America that's still celebrated. You'll never come any closer to finding out *why* this flood is happening… but that just adds to the whole 'life goes on' philosophy that's echoed so pleasantly.

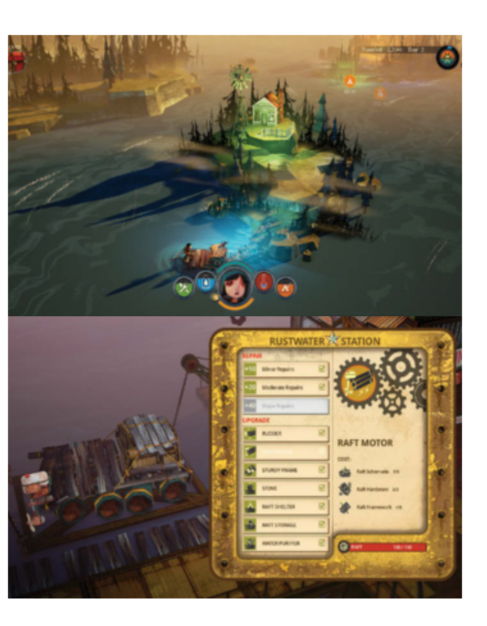
VERDICT

BIG ON HEART, BUT LIGHT ON MECHANICS





Above: You're going to be spending a lot of time on the water, so learning to plot your course ahead of time and avoid damaging your raft is vital.



WILL YOU HACK OR BE HACKED?

Pony Island

In *Pony Island* you control a happy little Pony whose only mission in life is to hop over fences and reach the end goal. At least, that's the facade behind which a more sinister reality awaits. It turns out *Pony Island* is actually some sort of evil arcade cabinet that traps human souls. The real protagonist of *Pony Island* is you, the player, and your enemy is the arcade game's mysterious creator, a seemingly sinister figure that crops up in text form, demanding that you hand over your soul. Yes, this game is a bit weird.

This mystery developer has apparently already trapped the soul of one unwitting victim, who contacts you via a messenger window requesting your help. This is where things get really bizarre: as if they weren't already.

Your fourth wall-smashing mission is to hack your way into the inner workings of the fictional *Pony Island* arcade cabinet, re-arrange its code structure, delete its 'core program files' and essentially break the game to release your mystery friend from ghostly captivity.

This bizarre objective presents itself in the form of puzzles that have you manipulating wonky menus, finding secret passwords, hacking user profiles, and even playing around with computer code to 'crash' the game. In-between spouts of hacking, the game's seemingly malevolent creator forces you to play levels in his simplistic fence hopping adventure as he angrily makes unfair changes to the game to combat your inevitable success.

It also plays tricks on you. At one point the game had us fooled severely enough that we almost sent foul-mouthed messages to one of our actual real-life friends, thinking they were messing with us. And this wasn't the only anecdotal moment that broke the fourth wall, but we can't say too much without spoiling the experience.

It's incredibly clever in ways that harks back to the GameCube classic, *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*, which had gamers frantically getting out of their seats to attempt to swat an annoying fly on their TV screens before realising the game was pulling their legs.

Pony Island will screw with your head, mislead you, break on you, and at one point even ask you to quit playing. And it does all this in good faith that you have the acquired taste to appreciate its quirkiness. If you don't, you probably won't even make it past the first five minutes, and that being said, this is certainly not a game for everyone. It's incredibly short too – with a decent rate of progress you'll see the end credits within a mere three hours.

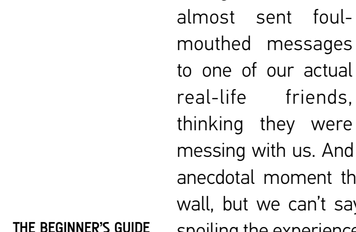
But despite its short length, overt simplicity and some droning repetition, *Pony Island* has to be commended for being bold enough to present such an oddball idea in such an unapologetic fashion. For those with the pallet to appreciate its unique offering, this will be among the most memorable (and fleeting) games you'll play this year.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Daniel Mullins Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £3.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 2GB RAM, DirectX 9.0, 400MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

BETTER THAN



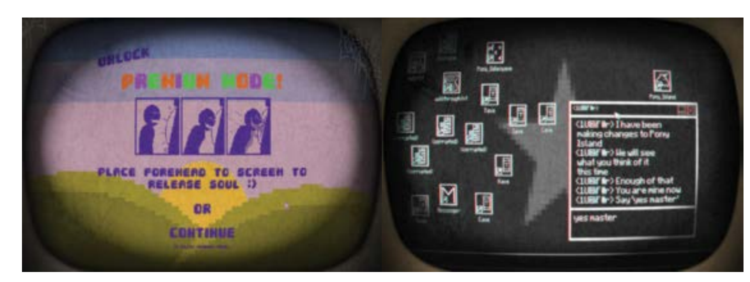
WORSE THAN

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

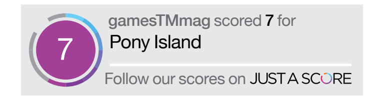
JUST A PONY: Having started life as a 48-hour game dev jam project, *Pony Island* is short and light on variety. With more time it could been expanded beyond a novel three-hour jaunt.

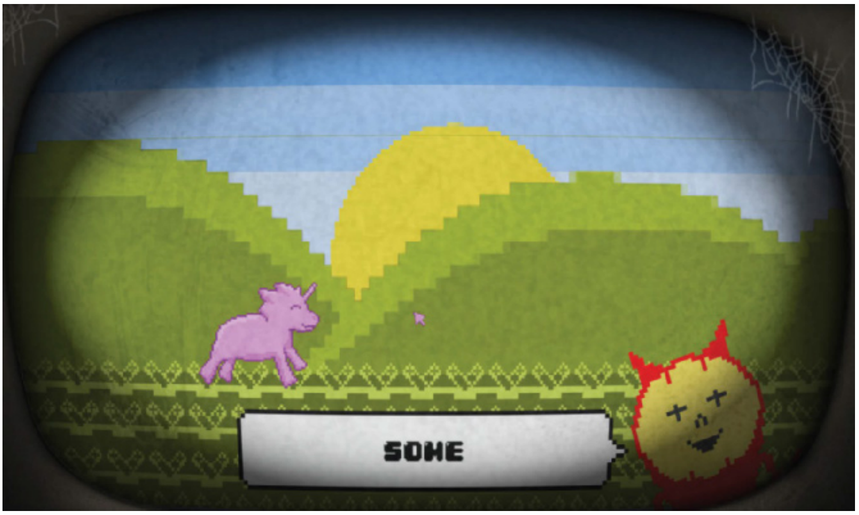


Below: These computer code-themed puzzles make up a large portion of the game. You rearrange triggers to direct the order of the code, changing its outcome. Programming skills aren't required but familiarity will help.

VERDICT

CLEVER, UNIQUE, INVENTIVE BUT BRIEF AND REPETITIVE







Above: As you hack your way through *Pony Island* you'll escape the confines of the game and find yourself poking around a pseudo operating system, trying to find holes in its security while communicating with the game's mystery developer on chat.

TEEN THRILLER WITH A TALKATIVE TWIST

Oxenfree

A group of teenagers dice with the paranormal during an island vacation gone wrong in this thriller adventure, but *Oxenfree* is as much about relationships as it is about ghosts and ghouls. It attempts to tug at your heart strings with richly developed characters, but despite a moody atmosphere and fantastic voice performances, it falls short of being truly memorable.

Five teens embark on a weekend retreat to a picturesque island that was once a military base. As you do, we guess. Things get off to a good start, with drinks and a bonfire on the beach. But the trip soon goes awry when your character, Alex, and her new stepbrother Jonas wander off to explore a nearby cave, which leads to an encounter with a sinister paranormal force. Obviously.

It sounds like a conventional paranormal thriller: you explore the island, tracking down your friends while using a radio to tune into ghostly broadcasts, activating mysterious portals, encountering glitches in the flow of time and numerous other peculiar, mind-bending events. But *Oxenfree* is a more sentimental game that attempts to explore the intricacies of human interaction and relationships. It's a game about dialogue.

As you wander the island, Alex engages in constant conversation with whomever she's with. As these conversations unfold, you're frequently prompted to choose your responses. This isn't a new mechanic by any means, but these responses are remarkably organic in nature; your options are rarely clearly good or bad; there's no right or wrong.

Your choices affect the cleverly interwoven conversations and nuances of the plot, which lets you explore the relationships between Alex and her peers and pivotal events in their lives. This makes for an intriguing story that follows in the footsteps of *Heavy Rain* and the narrative-lead works of Telltale Games. But *Oxenfree* ultimately fails to reach the bar set by such titles.

The script, while superbly performed, fails to realistically portray the distress we'd expect from teenagers trapped on a deserted island with a demonic force. Rather than frequent hysteria, these teens remain unnaturally calm, with over-baked witty one-liners and Nickelodeon-style wisecracks.

That along with an especially zoomed out camera, toy-like character models, and some illogical behaviour creates an unfortunate emotional disconnect, and that's a rather critical issue when you consider that the game's snail-like pacing leans quite heavily on its vital conversation mechanic. Regardless, *Oxenfree* is ambitious, atmospheric, and still intriguing enough that it's well worth playing if you fancy an artistic break from the typical arcade indie experience.

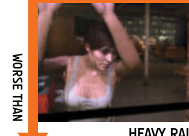
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, XBOX ONE
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Night School Studio
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM Windows 7, Intel i3 2.0 GHz CPU, 2 GB RAM, 1GB Shader Model 3.0 Compatible GPU, DirectX 9.0c
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

THE OLD CITY: LEVIATHAN





WORSE THAN

HEAVY RAIN



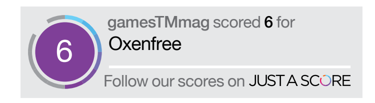
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TUNE IN: Alex's radio plays a starring role in the game. You scan frequencies by slowly moving your mouse horizontally. Find a fiendish frequency and prepare for things to get creepy.

VERDICT

INTRIGUING GAME HELD BACK BY A FALTERING SCRIPT







Above: The art style in *Oxenfree*, the work of former Disney staff, is uniquely gorgeous. Intentionally drab in places and vibrant in others, its soft pastel tones combine with a mellow soundtrack to create an intensely atmospheric island.

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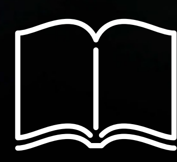
A PINT OF BEER



A STEAK PIE



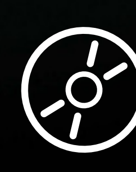
1/3 OF A CINEMA TICKET



A MAGAZINE



A FAST FOOD MEAL



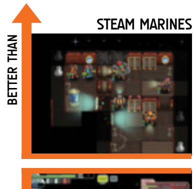
1/2 A CD

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Choice Provisions
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows 7 x64, Processor: Intel Core i5, Memory: 2 GB RAM, Graphics: DirectX 11 compatible graphics card, Storage: 2 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

STEAM MARINES





FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

WORSE THAN

DICE WITH DEATH

Tharsis

Space travel is hard, unforgiving and dangerous. If you hadn't worked that out for yourself, *Tharsis* will make sure you're aware of it before very long. Having encountered trouble on a journey to Mars, your goal is to keep the ship's crew alive by managing its food supply, mitigating problems with the ship itself and keeping stress and health in check. This seems intimidating, but a quick play through the tutorial is all it takes for you to get acquainted with the dice-based system that governs your available actions.

Of course, the use of dice implies a certain element of randomness, and it's here that the problems occur. The interface in *Tharsis* makes perfect sense and allows you to plan your actions effectively, but no matter how intelligently you assign your crew (and therefore the dice assigned to them) to tasks and incidents, a set of bad rolls will result in damage to the ship and deaths amongst the crew. Worse yet, incidents persist between turns, meaning that anything you fail to deal with in one turn will still be waiting for you alongside a fresh batch of disasters. Of course, if you encounter an incident with a high repair value and plenty of "void" hazards (which cause your dice to disappear) on higher rolls, you're probably scuppered anyway.

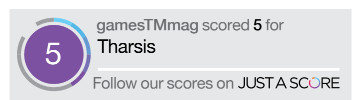
It's hard to survive in *Tharsis*, and that seems to be what the developer was going for. However, while the dice system is intriguing, none of your options ever feel like they're making a major difference in mitigating adverse rolls. With that crucial sense of agency stripped away, the design feels less like a game and more like a masochistic exercise in futility.



Below: Dice can be assigned to a variety of purposes, including projects, crew skills, module skills and repairs, but, as this screen shows, high rolls are crucial.

VERDICT

AN INTERESTING BUT FRUSTRATING SPACE ODDITY



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: La Cosa Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Peter Moorhead
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LOST IN SHADOW



THE SWAPPER

WORSE THAN

I SAID HEY, WHAT'S GOING ON?

KLAUS

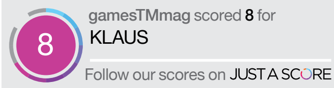
There are games that finish with more questions than answers and there are games that finish definitively, everyone getting a clear picture of what has happened in its final moments. *KLAUS*, a puzzle platformer, is of the former variety, its thought-provoking narrative leaving players to put the pieces together.

Waking up with amnesia in a basement, you play as Klaus, so named because of the tattoo on his arm. Once you've dusted yourself off, an existential journey through the building begins, meeting bosses and a brawny playable friend, KI, along the way. Breaking the fourth wall via textual speech, the protagonist addresses the player constantly. This method of conversational plot is what drives the story and you to keep playing, a relationship with Klaus, and KI, forming as a result of seeing into their thoughts and feelings. The story is also one that can be sympathised with, the greater picture not only looking at Klaus' life, but existence as a whole, metaphors surrounding work and individualism being littered throughout.

As well as having a good story, *KLAUS* is a great puzzle game, one that gives you the right balance of frustration, reward and teamwork. The five worlds that it comprises of are all unique and challenging, Glitch World being particularly interesting. Memory levels can also be unlocked in the game, and revisited in Arcade mode, ones that give you access to a secret inside Klaus' head if you finish them, the sheer amount of different challenges and designs for these levels, and the game as a whole, being impressive. However, *KLAUS* does overstay its welcome a tad, some level trimming perhaps giving the game a less chore-like feeling towards the end. Despite this, *KLAUS* is still a fantastic puzzle platformer, one that will make you think as well as solve, jump and occasionally, swear.

VERDICT

A THOUGHTFUL EXPERIENCE WITH GREAT GAMEPLAY





Above: Keys are dotted throughout the levels and you'll need to find these to give you access to things, such as terminals. Terminals can be hacked by Klaus, resulting in environmental pieces moving within the level.

GO TOGETHER OR GO HOME

Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 4

With Masashi Kishimoto's long-running manga series having finally reached its conclusion, it seems possible that we may not see further tie-in games to accompany it. But if *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 4* is the end for Naruto as a gaming property, it's a series going out on a high note. This is an evolutionary sequel, doing everything its predecessors did, only bigger and better.

Just as in previous entries in the series, this game offers compelling ninja combat based on timing and positioning, and a visual treatment that perfectly captures the spirit of the source material. The core combat has been revamped this year, adding several new mechanics including elemental powers and weapon/armour breaking attacks. It's still not hugely deep, as the simplified controls limit the number of unique attacks you can perform, but it's accessible and offers plenty to explore with over 100 characters to try. Even if the story mode goes completely over your head (and it might, given that it concludes a story started well over a decade ago), it's not hard to appreciate the dramatic battles that it offers, including some titanic struggles between enormous creatures. The cel-shaded visuals are better than before too, with enhanced particle effects and higher quality character models, though it's not as impressive an upgrade over last-gen entries in the series as we'd envisaged – it still looks lovely, but doesn't reach the height of *Guilty Gear Xrd*.

You need not be a fan of *Naruto* to check out *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 4*, though; the fighting is good enough to appeal to any player, particularly if you feel that traditional one-on-one fighters are overly complex.

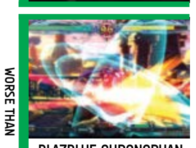
DETAILS

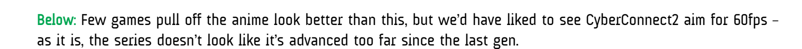
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco Games
DEVELOPER: CyberConnect2
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (1-2 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN
ULTIMATE NINJA STORM REVOLUTION



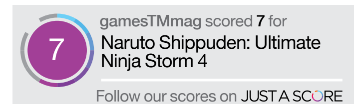

WORSE THAN
BLAZBLUE CHRONOPHANTASMA EXTEND





Below: Few games pull off the anime look better than this, but we'd have liked to see CyberConnect2 aim for 60fps – as it is, the series doesn't look like it's advanced too far since the last gen.

VERDICT
ULTIMATE FOR FANS, GOOD FOR ANYONE ELSE



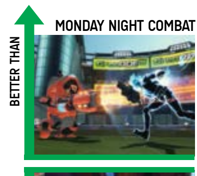
INVASION OF THE CO-OP SHOOTER

Fortified

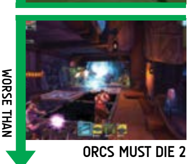
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Clapfoot
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
MONDAY NIGHT COMBAT



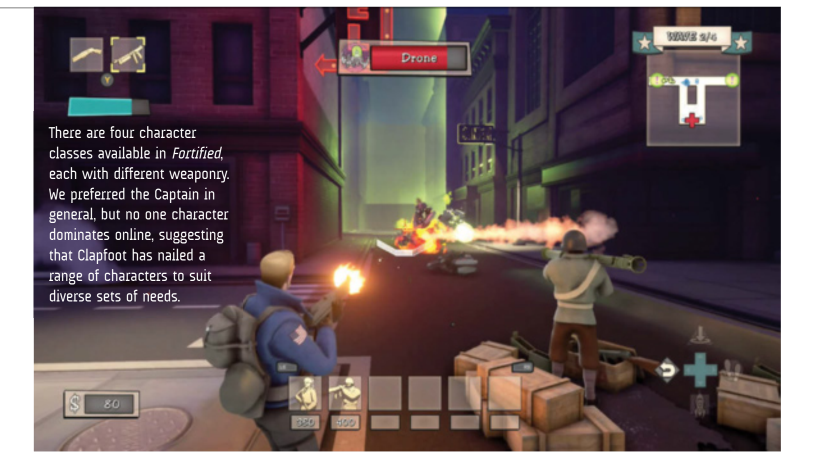
WORSE THAN
ORCS MUST DIE 2



If you love Fifties sci-fi in which invaders from the red planet are used as an unsubtle metaphor for the red menace of the Soviet Union, you'll feel right at home with *Fortified*. Between the well-constructed retro-futuristic aesthetic and gung-ho attitudes of the heroes that constitute Earth's best hope of resistance, *Fortified* could easily pass for any pulp novel of the era. It's not exactly a subtle exploration of character that *Fortified* is going for, but that's no bad thing.

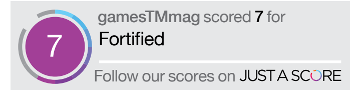
Each stage of *Fortified* sees you setting up a loadout, then placing strategic defences to protect your rockets – these can be infantry, artillery or simply helpful objects like exploding barrels. You'll then face waves of attack in which you can become actively involved by using your own weaponry, with unlimited ammo but varying reload rates. However, on the default difficulty level of the campaign mode this isn't always necessary – if you set up your defences well enough, they'll handle the majority of threats for you. Hard mode mitigates this to some extent by limiting the time between waves, but it's not an ideal solution.

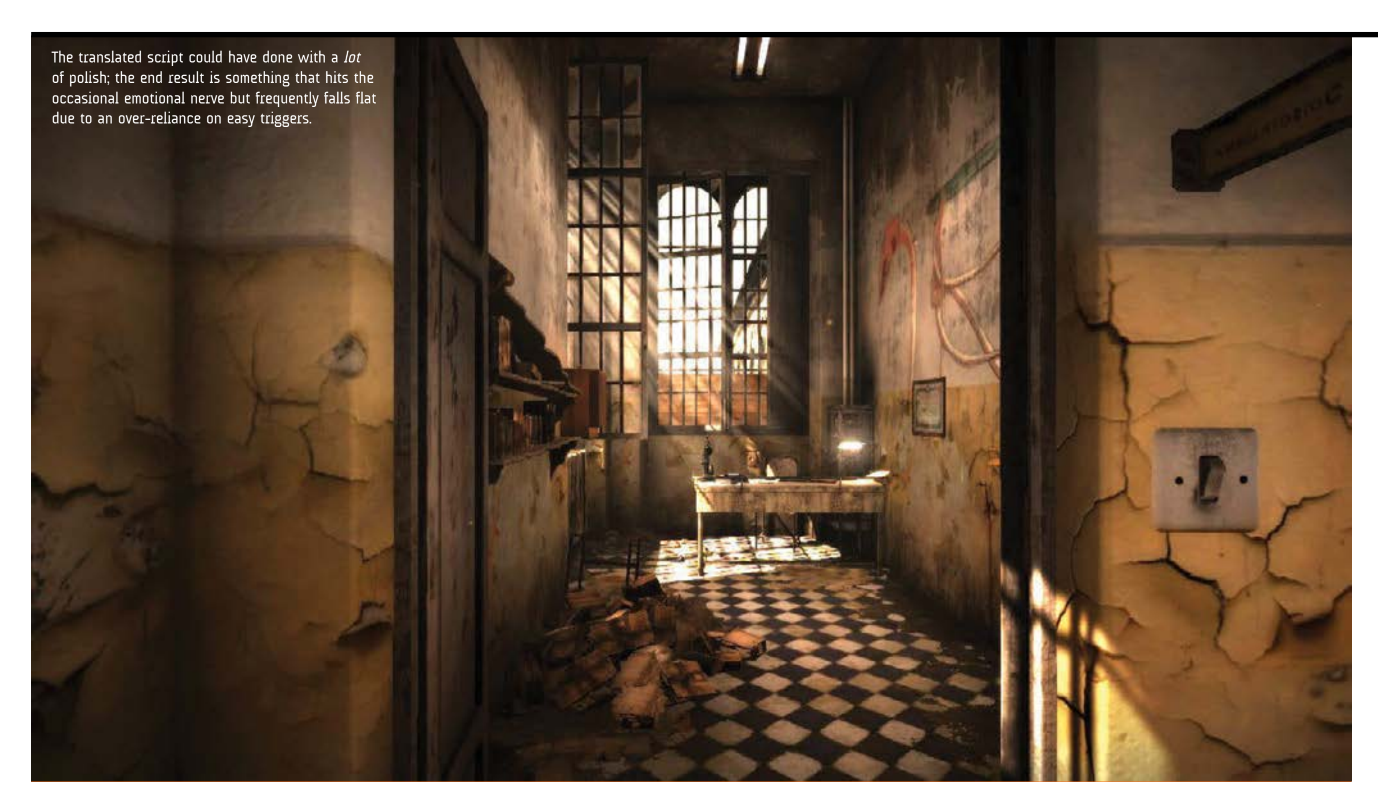
In co-op, enemies take more punishment as an incentive to get players to work together, and this generally works pretty well if you're playing with a group that can co-ordinate effectively. However, it's better played with friends – if you're playing with public groups it's possible for players to join mid-way through a game, leaving the new player confused and inviting failure for the existing team. *Fortified* is visually attractive and well designed in general, with enjoyable mechanics and solid technical performance. Its lifespan will be limited if you're playing alone or with unknowns, but you'll get a lot out of it if you can find a good group to play with.



There are four character classes available in *Fortified*, each with different weaponry. We preferred the Captain in general, but no one character dominates online, suggesting that Clapfoot has nailed a range of characters to suit diverse sets of needs.

VERDICT
BEST WITH A TEAM OF HEROES





The translated script could have done with a *lot* of polish; the end result is something that hits the occasional emotional nerve but frequently falls flat due to an over-reliance on easy triggers.

NOT AS DAZZLING AS IT COULD HAVE BEEN

The Town Of Light

Oh, wonderful; another horror about a mysterious and abandoned asylum, we thought. Get ready for jump scares and shadows, right? Well, not quite, though we'd forgive you for thinking exactly that about *The Town Of Light*. Thankfully, this isn't your standard exhaustingly jumpy trawl through a dingy/gory mental institution. Instead, *The Town Of Light* brings you the story of an ex-patient, the unhinged yet mostly coherent Renee, circa Italy, 1942, four years after her treatment/incarceration.

And yet, while it's easy to tick off some trigger warning boxes, so often shorthand signifiers for lazy heartstring-plucking – sexual assault, torture, paedophilia, tick – and come to the conclusion that *The Town Of Light* is a powerful story, it's sadly not polished enough, not tight enough in its delivery to be truly affecting. While there are elements of unbridled unpleasantness, made all the more disturbing with the facsimile of a real-life asylum, there's no connection built between the player and Renee, to give you reason to care. When tasked with putting a doll somewhere warm, for example, despite the sunshine outside, you *have* to place the doll under harsh lamplight. One of many careless wedges unthinkingly driven between player and character, perhaps, or a sign of her institutionalised state?

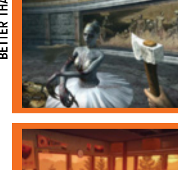
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Italy
PUBLISHER: LKA.it
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £13.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7/8/10 64-bit, Intel Core i3, 4GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 460, AMD Radeon HD 6770 1GB VRAM, DirectX Version 11, 8GB storage
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

RISE OF NIGHTMARES





WORSE THAN

FIREWATCH

It *could* be argued that there's a parallel to be drawn between a player having to go through pointless exercises they're not emotionally invested in and the way that mental illness can force one to go through actions they don't want to, but with the clumsy hand with which this is delivered, that conclusion feels a little generous. The oh-so-meaningful voice-acting and the typo-riddled subtitles don't help to build a feeling of quality, either.

And yet, the building and grounds of the asylum are wonderfully recreated, and *The Town Of Light* in its entirety delivers an unnerving experience far removed from the tedious 'dark plus spooky noise plus shoddy electricals' horror formula. The game is at its best when immersing you in Renee's personal, hauntingly strange experience, sprinkled with hyper-sensory psychosis and warped memory, before bringing you back to an ungrounded reality.

There is also something to be said for the unflinching yet unsensationalist exploration of 'insanity'. Though it's a dangerous path (the entertainment industry's strict adherence to asylums and mental health wards being dangerous, ugly places, built to trap and torture innocent souls), mental health wards around the time of WWII have had their often abhorrent treatment of patients well documented. It's a fascinating period of history, and the fact that *you* are included in the story, as a voice of reason in Renee's head, literally answering questions she raises about her treatment and what to do, lifts this game to a higher intellectual level. What *do* you think of the hospital staff carrying out these treatments? Were they doing the best they could or were they wilfully neglectful?

It is for this self-analysis and exploration of ideas that, for all its flaws, we do recommend *The Town Of Light*. It isn't particularly good at telling its own story coherently or engagingly, but it excels at providing a few hours of raw, memorable storytelling, elements of which will stay with you long after you've come away from Volterra.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SEVER THE GAMEPLAY: Renee's exploration of the asylum that holds so many horrific memories for her would have been much more emotionally resonant without the player-alienating tasks to be completed.

VERDICT

GENUINE CREATIVE POTENTIAL, BUT LACKS POLISH

6

gamesTMmag scored **6** for
The Town Of Light
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE



"SSX had been okay, Tricky was cool, but SSX 3 was just a pleasure to play all the way through"

FIONA SPERRY, FOUNDER, THREE FIELDS ENTERTAINMENT



WHY I ♥…

SSX 3

FIONA SPERRY, FOUNDER, THREE FIELDS ENTERTAINMENT

"A game I love? Mine would probably have to be SSX 3*, actually. I was thinking* SSX Tricky*, but that was just the start.* SSX 3 *was starting to get… I mean, it wasn't open world, but the series was starting to get this openness to it. It was really vibrant; it had great sound effects and music. The better you got at the game, the better it was. It was kind of like our* Burnout 3*, it was just really well executed.*

SSX *had been okay,* Tricky *was cool, but* SSX 3 *was just a pleasure to play all the way through. When it ended, we would just select a different character and start again. It's just a really well-made game and it gave me a lot of enjoyment. I don't know if it's my favourite game ever, but it's certainly one that sticks in my mind. Professionally, it's certainly had a lot of influence as well."*

RETRO

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... STAR WARS

As The Force Awakens prepares to hit Blu-ray and DVD we look back at the many, many games based on George Lucas' universe. How many have you played?

NO MOVIE LICENCE has as many games devoted to it as *Star Wars* does. Although the first game didn't arrive until five years after the original film, they soon began arriving thick and fast, eventually reaching saturation point during the early Noughties, when the release of *The Phantom Menace* and the original trilogy saw interest in the brand peak to an all new high.

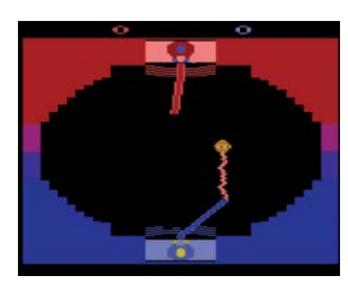
Interestingly, the first *Star Wars* games weren't actually made by Lucasfilm as the studio didn't have a dedicated games department. Instead the licence was given to the likes of Parker Bros and Atari, although George Lucas would still have the final say on what would appear in the final product. In fact, even when a games division was finally set up at Lucasfilm *Star Wars* games weren't even on the menu, with the developer instead working on original ideas such as *Ballblazer*, *Rescue On Fractalus!* and *The Eidolon*.

It wasn't until the early Nineties that the newly renamed LucasArts started to make its own *Star Wars* games, with early examples including *X-Wing* and *Rebel Assault*. More quickly followed, but it continued to license out the popular brand to other developers, including BioWare, Sega, Pandemic, Totally Games and many others. All in all over 120 *Star Wars* games have been released since the early Eighties, covering a wide array of genres, from educational games to first-person shoot-'em-ups. As a result we could never possibly cover all of them, although the following games do make up the best and worst examples from the ground-breaking saga.

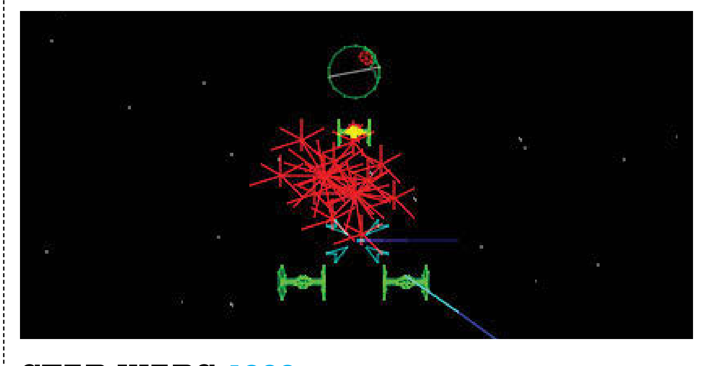
STARS WARS: JEDI ARENA 1983

ATARI 2600

Remember that sequence where Luke receives training from Ben Kenobi aboard the Millennium Falcon? Well, Parker Bros decided to make an entire game on it. The end results were not very good, as if a million gamers suddenly cried out at once. The aim is to deflect shots from a training droid and then deflect them back towards your opponent who resides on the other side of the screen. It's a decent enough idea and has elements of the excellent *Warlords*, but it's let down by shoddy counter-intuitive controls. Even having four difficulty levels can't save it.







STAR WARS 1983

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Atari's wire-frame-based shooter remains one of the most faithful adaptations of the original film and still maintains a cult following some three decades after its release. It features lots of excellent digitised speech, a rousing score, plenty of fast-paced action and three distinct stages to battle through: an initial skirmish with TIE Fighters, a battle across the Death Star's surface and the final deadly trench run, which gets progressively tougher each time you blow the Death Star up. Due to its immense popularity it was ported to a staggering number of systems back in the day, many of which were of a very high standard. It's easily the first *Star Wars* game to truly capture the thrill and excitement of the original movie.

STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK 1982

ATARI 2600, INTELLIVISION

Star Wars was already five years old by the time the first licensed game came out, as a result, Parker Bros focused on creating a videogame based on the excellent second movie. Choosing to focus on the dramatic Hoth battle – which would be the inspiration for many later games – it sees you scrolling across an impressively smooth landscape trying to shoot down as many AT-ATs as possible. You need to stop the AT-AT's from reaching Echo Base, so simply shoot them down, *Defender* style. Whilst not very original it was a lot of fun.

RETURN OF THE JEDI: DEATH STAR BATTLE 1983

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Another Atari 2600 exclusive from Parker Bros and another complete waste of the *Star Wars* licence. Controlling the Millennium Falcon you must shoot waves of enemies in the bottom half of the screen until you can break through the Death Star's shield. You then have to take out the Death Star's core before it can be fully constructed. Once completed you get to do it all over again, but you'll have switched off by then.



STAR WARS: RETURN OF THE JEDI 1994

ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ Atari's second coin-op adaptation moved away from wire-frame graphics and used raster graphics via an interesting isometric perspective. The results were decent, if not spectacular, with gameplay spread across several stages. The first level is a fun Speeder bike chase that has you avoiding obstacles and shooting down enemies. The second stage switches to the Millennium Falcon while the third alternates between the Falcon and piloting an AT-ST. It's fun, but lacked the impact of *Star Wars*.





STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK 1985

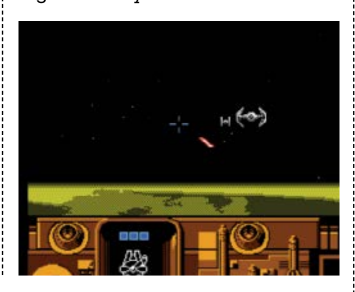
ARCADE, VARIOUS

■ Atari's third coin-op game wasn't a popular one. It utilised the same wire-frame graphics that had made *Star Wars* so popular and once again featured a lot of variety in its gameplay. This time, players switched between Luke Skywalker and Han Solo and could take part in a variety of tasks, from shooting down AT-ATs to taking out TIE Fighters and negotiating an asteroid field. Unfortunately for Atari, many coin-op vendors didn't want to upgrade their *Star Wars* cabinets.

STAR WARS 1987

FAMICOM

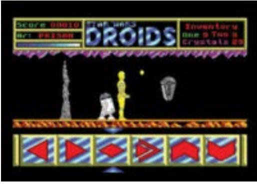
■ Many won't have played Namco's game as it was released exclusively in Japan for the Famicom. It's loosely based on the original film and is the earliest example of a character being able to use force abilities in a *Star Wars* game. Ostensibly a platformer, Luke climbs and jumps his way around levels using said force abilities and his trusty lightsaber, cleaving up enemies as he goes. While there are some cool first-person battles in the Millennium Falcon and Luke's X-Wing, it's all ruined by a stupidly high difficulty level.



STAR WARS DROIDS 1988

VARIOUS

■ Visually, this 8-bit adaptation of the cartoon show was great, easily capturing its cute style. Sadly the actual gameplay wasn't up to the same standard (although, let's face it, any game based around the adventures of C3-PO is always going to have an uphill struggle). *Droids*' gameplay consists of the two robot buddies navigating eight levels by accessing lifts and triggering Simon-style passwords. Needless to say it's exciting as it sounds and gets boring incredibly quickly.

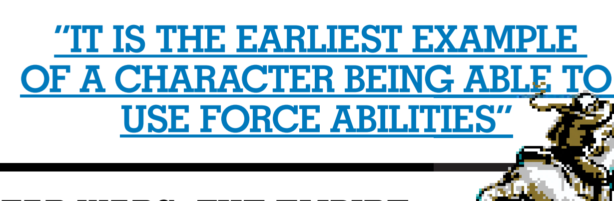




STAR WARS 1991

NES, VARIOUS

■ Another *Star Wars* Famicom game, but this one actually reached the west. This is an interesting effort that features overhead Land Speeder stages, side-on platforming and the odd first-person section. Characters can switch between Luke, Leia and Han, but only Luke has infinite lives. It sounds decent, although the actual graphics are rather dinky. Interestingly, the Game Gear version has exclusive levels not found on the other consoles.



"IT IS THE EARLIEST EXAMPLE OF A CHARACTER BEING ABLE TO USE FORCE ABILITIES"

STAR WARS: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK 1992

NES, GAME BOY

■ This sequel followed on from *Star Wars*, but only reached the NES and Game Boy, with the Master System and Game Gear losing out. You only play as Luke, but your force powers are greatly expanded. It retains the same variety as *Star War*, but with greatly refined controls. Sadly, as the NES was slowing down in popularity *Return Of The Jedi* never appeared.





SUPER STAR WARS 1992

SNES

■ Recently released on PS4 and Vita, *Super Star Wars* had everything. You could play as Luke, Han or Chewie, the graphics were excellent with some insane Mode 7 effects, while the music was absolutely superb. While mainly a run-and-gun it threw in the odd Mode 7 level and included the now famous trench run.





STAR WARS: REBEL ASSAULT 1993

PC, VARIOUS

Rebel Assault was a big deal at the time, being one of the first PC games to make extensive use of FMV. Its gameplay wasn't quite as impressive, however, as it's little more than a basic on-rails shooter that typically has you piloting a variety of different spaceships (although one level has you running around on foot). It's also notable for featuring plenty of new and completely forgettable characters.

STAR WARS ARCADE 1993

ARCADE, 32X

Sega's first coin-op game was quality. Housed in a huge bespoke cabinet, it allowed one person to act as a pilot, while the other could handle the guns. Although there are only three different missions – shooting down TIE Fighters, destroying a Super Star Destroyer and navigating the trench – it's full of explosive set-pieces and never gets boring. An exclusive 32X port followed in 1994.







STAR WARS: X-WING 1993

PC, VARIOUS

Star Wars: X-Wing was the dramatic dog-fighting game that *Rebel Assault* should have been. It not only allowed you to fight against the Empire in a variety of Rebel ships, but like many other games authorised by LucasFilm, it was considered canon too. There's plenty of variety to the gameplay with the player participating in escort missions, vicious dogfights and deadly strikes against key Empire targets. Famed for its polygon graphics and excellent use of iMuse it became a smash hit, with several expansions.

SUPER STAR WARS: EMPIRE STRIKES BACK 1993

SNES

This Super Nintendo sequel features a number of subtle changes. Characters now have secondary and primary weapons, it's no longer possible to choose your hero at the start of the game and Luke can now block with his lightsaber and eventually use force powers. It still alternates between side-on run-and-gun stages and some neat Mode 7 stages (particularly the battle of Hoth) but the graphics have been greatly improved and some of the bosses look spectacular. Sadly, it's marred by a somewhat frustrating difficulty level.





MIKE HALLY INTERVIEW

The Star Wars co-creator on the classic arcade game



What was it like working on *Star Wars*?

It was the most intense project that I had ever been involved in, let alone being the project leader and game designer. Every single day was a battle of issues involving every department associated with *Star Wars*' development. From a team perspective, we were up against shared company resources, along with trying to create the impossible. New technology, a game worthy of the *Star Wars* name and a product that would out-earn any other game of the time were just some of the daily pressures we faced. And let's not forget the creation of a brand new controller, voice and music to the mix?

Was Lucasfilm a stickler for detail?

From the initial meeting with the licensing group to all the follow-up meetings with the games department group there was one consistent theme that the Lucasfilm groups had… they were all very protective of the *Star Wars* universe and every detail had to be accurate. If I had any element that was not accurate, they instantly made me aware and it had to be changed. Since they were also involved in game development, they did understand some of the decisions that I made.

Was there much pressure?

Oh it never stopped. There were two main areas of extreme pressure. One was from the company and their need for this game to get finished and be a huge success, while the other was internal pressure from within the team to be a part of something special and make a name for ourselves. I think every development team at Atari was under a lot of pressure to perform and create magic, but the *Star Wars* coin-op was a new and different venture for us so it just magnified the expectations everyone had.

Why vector graphics?

We ended up going with vector graphics because Atari felt that they were best suited to *Star Wars*' development and what it required based on the original game designs. It was one of the first three-dimensional games and at the time it was the only display that we had access to that had a chance of pulling off what we wanted to achieve. At this time in the evolution of videogames almost every coin-operated game had its own custom hardware to maximise the needs for the specific requirements of the game.

Why was it so popular?

Star Wars captured the essence of one of the greatest properties ever created for the big screen and beyond. It allowed someone to become Luke Skywalker and play an interactive role just like what people viewed on the big screen. It had just the right mix of all the elements it takes to make a winner… For me, it's a true timeless piece of history and art.



STAR WARS CHESS 1993

PC, MEGA CD



We'd love to say that this is a stunningly innovative take on the ancient board game, but we would be lying, sadly. It's nothing more than a simple adaptation of *Chess*, but it is clearly better because it's *Star Wars Chess*. All this really means is that famous characters take the place of the playing pieces of the game, but now come with rather swish attack animations.

SUPER RETURN OF THE JEDI 1994

SNES

The last *Star Wars* SNES game once again features the ability to choose your character at the start of each level. It does however, limit the number of force powers Luke has access to and starts off with a really naff Mode 7 racing stage. Get past this however and you'll find a fun, if rather pedestrian game.



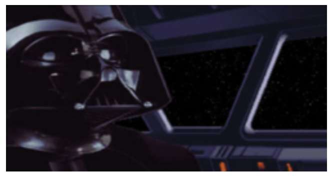


STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER 1994

PC, MAC

The follow-up to *X-Wing* allowed you to play as the Imperials. While it adds useful new mechanics such as a far better targeting system and the ability to access mission objectives in-game (far more useful than it sounds) it greatly enhances the overall gameplay by adding far better missions and some truly epic battles. As with *X-Wing* it was followed by an expansion, the rather spiffy *Defender Of The Empire*.

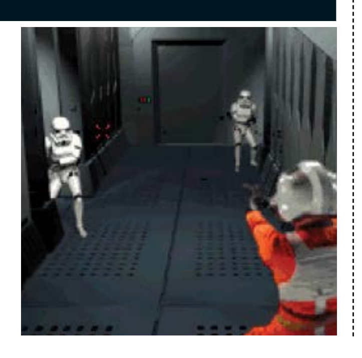




STAR WARS: REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE 1995

PC, MAC, PLAYSTATION

While the FMV was greatly improved, everything else about *The Hidden Empire* was pretty poor. The gameplay was still incredibly simplistic (although clever techniques do give the impression that you have more control) while the acting throughout is incredibly weak. The actual plot does manage to be fairly involving, but the twitchy controls and monotonous gameplay make it a surprisingly dull blaster.



CREATING SUPER STAR WARS

Kalani Streicher recalls the creation of a SNES classic

Why make it a run-and-gun?

I was a big fan of platform games and side-scrollers, *Contra*, *Super Castlevania*, *Turrican* and *Mega Man* on SNES were my favourite games. I was also playing the Willow arcade game, which inspired me to push the visual quality on the SNES above other games. I wanted it to be as good a side-scroller as *Contra* or *Castlevania*, with the visual quality of arcade games such as *Willow* or *Street Fighter*, and vehicle gameplay using Mode 7 as seen in *F-Zero*.

Why did you add different gameplay perspectives?

I wanted to allow players to interact with their favourite *Star Wars* vehicles in third or first-person perspective, and experience the different aspects they'd seen in the movies. I didn't want to utilise the vehicles in a side-scrolling or top-down fashion. I wanted the player to feel like they were in the vehicle racing across the desert or through the galaxy.

Did you study the original film?

I looked at every aspect of the movie in detail with the team and pointed out the environments and characters I wanted in the game. We used reference materials and photos from Lucasfilm's photo library, and took reference pictures of the actual movie models from the Lucas Archives. Everybody on the team was a hardcore *Star Wars* fan. I was also producing the X-Wing game at the same time, which added even more extensive research of every spacecraft and ship in the game. I was heavily entrenched in getting the authenticity of the *Star Wars* universe into these games.

How much control were you given?

We were in control of all creative aspects of the game such as game design, art and animation, and Sculptured was responsible for coding the game. Sculptured had a great engine, tools and development kits that allowed us to rapidly create levels and character animation. [Lead programmer] Peter Ward at Sculptured was an incredible engineer and a true *Star Wars* fan. I had such a blast working with him. Initially I created a design document outlining all specification and progression of the levels, characters and vehicles from the first to last level. We then did storyboards for the plot progression, cinematics and story panels. My concept and art lead Harrison Fong storyboarded a lot of them, which we then passed on to the team and converted it into digital artwork.

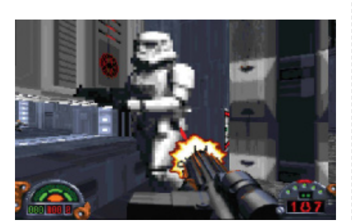
Tell us about the Mode 7 stages…

It was our first attempt to utilise Mode 7 in a different way than other games. The landspeeder stage had to show progression, moving across a desert towards the mountains in the distance. It was a fine balance of sprite usage for the terrain, enemy characters and distant parallaxing of the mountain range. We had to take that one step further with the X-Wing level, flying across the surface and then down the trench allowing the player to be able to move anywhere in space. And lastly integrating the Millenium Falcon took several iterations. It is such a unique ship that we fairly quickly ran out of sprites/tiles. We had to pull off every trick we had in the book for those sections.

STAR WARS: DARK FORCES 1995

PC, PLAYSTATION

This revolutionary FPS is so much more than just a *Doom* clone. In addition to featuring a genuine cinematic story (a first for the genre) it also allowed you to look up and down, jump or duck and added useful items that enhanced the gameplay. Luke Skywalker was originally going to be the protagonist, but a new hero Kyle Katarn, was added instead.





STAR WARS: SHADOW OF THE EMPIRE 1996

N64

Shadow Of The Empire kicks off with an excellent and familiar Hoth level, but soon jumps into exciting new *Star Wars* territory. While the camera isn't perfect, *Shadow Of The Empire* remains a solid third-person action game thanks to some intelligent level design, great boss fights and a genuinely good story. Oh and newcomer Dash Rendar is rather brilliant too.





STAR WARS: MASTERS OF TERAS KESAI 1997

PLAYSTATION

This PlayStation exclusive sounds like a fantastic idea, until you actually start playing it. While *Masters Of Teras Kesai* features an in-depth story that involves the Emperor being angry with Luke Skywalker about something or other, it's generally an excuse for lots of famous characters to kick the hell out of each other. Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Chewbacca and a scantily clad Princess Leia are all present and correct and all lumber around like they're in the advance stages of arthritis, due to the naff animation that's on display. Even the addition of Boba Fett, Darth Vader and book favourite, Mara Jade, can't make the game cool and it ends up feeling incredibly tired due to its boring special moves, overall clunky controls and tough difficulty level.

STAR WARS: X-WING VS TIE FIGHTER 1997

PC

This solid follow-up to TIE Fighter added greatly improved options for multiplayer gameplay, but dropped the popular campaign mode that made the earlier games so fun. Up to eight players could play at once, in a variety of gameplay modes, including standard free-for-alls and team-based events. Graphically it was superb for its time too, greatly improving on the engine featured in the earlier games. It was succeeded seven months later by the expansion Balance Of Power, which added a super campaign mode.



"WE'LL SAY THIS QUIETLY, BUT THIS IS BASICALLY THE BEST STAR WARS ARCADE GAME"





STAR WARS: YODA STORIES 1997

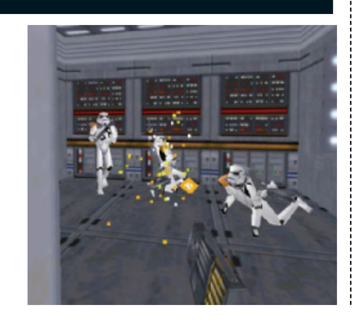
PC, MAC, GAME BOY COLOR

The gameplay of *Yoda Stories* is ridiculously basic, but we still find it enjoyable. It's essentially *Indiana Jones And His Desktop Adventures*, but with a *Star Wars* spin. Levels are procedurally generated and consist of Luke navigating each screen to find Yoda. Once discovered, Yoda gives Luke a variety of tasks to complete. An adaptation was released for Game Boy Color in 1999.

STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II 1997

PC

Everything about *Dark Forces*' sequel was suitably epic. It boasted an excellent new multiplayer mode, allowed for 3D acceleration-based graphics cards, the choice between first and third-person perspectives as well as the ability to use a lightsaber and Jedi force powers. While the force powers are fun (particularly in multiplayer mode) its the excellent lightsaber battles that make *Dark Forces II* so memorable.



STAR WARS TRILOGY ARCADE 1998

ARCADE



We'll say this quietly, but this is basically the best *Star Wars* arcade game. It features plenty of variety in its many missions and has incredible looking visuals to boot. Levels range from flying across the Death Star's surface to escaping Echo Base and racing around on Speeder Bikes, while its exciting bonus stages have you battling Darth Vader and Boba Fett.



DARON STINNETT

A brief look at Star Wars: Dark Forces



What was the design ethos behind the games?
We were focused on creating a game that allowed players to explore *Star Wars* environments in 3D for the first time. We felt like *Dark Forces* was an incredible opportunity to build what we all imagined lay beyond the sets created for the movie and bring those environments, characters, and stories to life and make the player feel like they were part of discovering it. So we knew that we needed strong characters and story. And we were also very focused on creating environments that felt as real as was possible given the tools and technology that was available at the time.

Did this change at all during development?
It didn't. We started with a vision of creating a game that was a fun and compelling exploration of *Star Wars* locations and giving the player the chance to become part of the *Star Wars* story and we stuck to it. I remember when the game was nearing completion and the president of LucasArts asked me if I wanted any more time to add anything more to *Dark Forces* and I said "no". I felt like we had realised our vision for the game and I did not feel like adding anything more would make it any better.

How did it feel to be involved with a Star Wars title? Was it a series that you had much love for beforehand?
It was awesome! It felt like I was transported to this amazing fantasy working environment. Where outside my window ILM might be crashing and blowing up jumbo jets (this was before they did that kind of thing with CG). And our offices where literally stacked with famous props from the movies that today are in museums. We frequently had lunch at the Ranch right next to George, and we felt like we were solving problems that no one had solved before. It was a fantastic experience and one of the highlights of my career.

STAR WARS EPISODE 1: RACER 1999

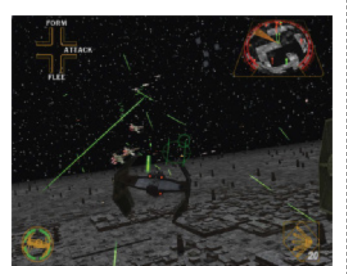
PC, VARIOUS

This is one of the best racing games on the N64. Based on one of the best sequences from *The Phantom Menace*, it features challenging AI racers, truly excellent track design, superb ship handling and even utilises the N64's expansion pack. It's easily the best *Star Wars* racing game, although Sega's coin-op *Star Wars: Racer Arcade* comes pretty damned close.









STAR WARS ROGUE SQUADRON II: ROGUE LEADER 2001

GAMECUBE

While the N64 and PC predecessor was good, *Rogue Leader* was *soooo* much better. It features superlative visuals that helped sell plenty of GameCubes and a large number of fantastically designed missions. There's lots of ships to pilot and plenty of great unlockables to discover, including five bonus levels. While the third game was less impressive, it did allow you to play all of *Rogue Leader*'s levels in co-op mode.





STAR WARS: GALACTIC BATTLEGROUNDS 2001

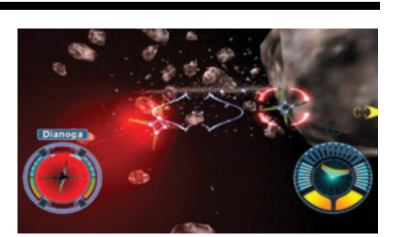
PC, MAC

Considering that the films feature so many giant battles, it's rather surprising that it took so long to produce a *Star Wars* RTS. Collaboration between LucasArts and Ensemble Studios, *Galactic Battlegrounds* utilises the Genie engine that was also used to power *Age Of Empires I* and *II*. One interesting aspect of *Galactic Battlegrounds* is that victory can be achieved in several ways, as opposed to simply wiping out the opposing team (although this of course remains an option too). An expansion pack, *Star Wars: Galactic Battlegrounds Clone Campaigns* was released in 2003.

STAR WARS: STARFIGHTER 2001

VARIOUS

The best way to describe *Starfighter* is as *Rogue Squadron* with a Naboo-based skin. It's a solid enough action game, with the play taking part in a variety of missions whilst flying around in a number of different ships. An upgraded version of the game was released for Xbox and featured greatly enhanced graphics along with a superior expanded multiplayer mode.

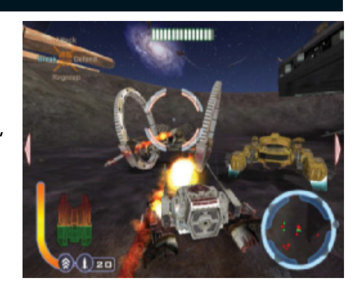




STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS 2002

VARIOUS

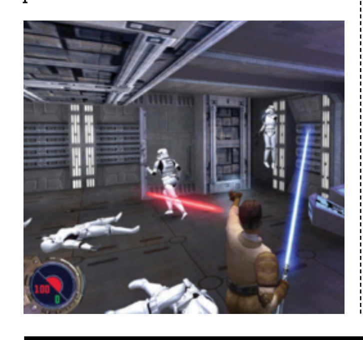
This was the first of several *Star Wars* games by Pandemic Studios and it's not bad at all. While there are a few levels that focus on Anakin Skywalker and Mace Windu, it's predominantly a vehicular-based action game. The handling throughout is very solid and there's a great number of vehicles to use. Oh, and the multiplayer mode is rather decent too.



STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST 2002

VARIOUS

Utilising the *Quake III* engine, *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* features greatly enhanced lightsabre duels and continues to push the multiplayer mode that debuted in *Jedi Knight*. The Xbox and GameCube versions, coded by Vicarious Visions, aren't as polished as the PC port, but are still perfectly entertaining third-person adventures.





STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC 2003

VARIOUS

BioWare's decision to separate its *Star Wars* game from the films by 4,000 odd years was a fantastic decision. It effortlessly introduces new characters and events, whilst giving everything an air of familiarity. It features a host of memorable playable characters and introduces many of the ingredients that would shape the company's later games. The story has plenty of clever twists and turns, while the combat throughout (based on the D20 rules system) is superb.

STAR WARS GALAXIES 2003

PC

This was the first attempt at a *Star Wars* MMORPG, and it proved very successful. The original game introduced 10 characters classes, ten professions and ten planets. The planets were roughly 225square kilometres in size, although those of later expansions were typically smaller. Due to its popularity, three expansions followed: *Jump To Lightspeed*, *Rage Of The Wookies* and *Trials Of Obi-Wan*. It also introduced a trading card game, but the servers were sadly shut down in 2011.



STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT 2004

VARIOUS

Battlefront was Pandemic's answer to the popular *Battlefield* series. It's incredibly authentic and features superb aesthetics, but is let down by its lack of a proper single player campaign. The conquest-based battles take place on a variety of popular planets and players could use both land and air-based vehicles. Characters from the films, including Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker can fight alongside you too, giving *Battlefront* a truly epic feel.









LEGO STAR WARS: THE VIDEO GAME 2005

VARIOUS

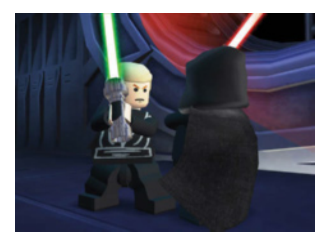
This was the first of many LEGO games from Traveller's Tales. It introduces many mechanics that would become key components of the series going forward, including stud collecting, the switching of characters to solve puzzles and co-operative gameplay. While a decent start to the series it was let down by some truly dire vehicle sections that were a chore to play.



STAR WARS REPUBLIC COMMANDO 2005

XBOX, PC, MOBILE

This is effectively a *Star Wars* take on *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon*, with the player controlling a squad of commandos. The gameplay is solid with easy-to-use squad activations and there's a lot of variety in the game's missions. It's also notable for being the first *Star Wars* game to feature licensed music.





LEGO STAR WARS: THE ORIGINAL TRILOGY 2006

VARIOUS

The second LEGO game from Traveller's Tales was far better than the original, and not just because it's based on the superior original films. The puzzles and interacting with characters are better and more frequent. The vehicle levels feel far less clunky, while there are even more things to collect. The Mos Eisley Cantina acts as a hub where players can unlock new levels and buy over 50 different characters. They generally have more abilities than they did in the original game.



STAR WARS: EMPIRE AT WAR 2006

PC, MAC

This excellent RTS takes place in real time and features three distinctive modes. Galactic Conquest is a huge open-ended sandbox campaign where you can play as the Empire of Rebels. Skirmish Mode plays out like a more traditional RTS, while the story-based Campaign Mode is set before and during the Battle Of Yavin. An expansion, *Forces Of Corruption* was also released.

STAR WARS: THE FORCE UNLEASHED 2008

VARIOUS

This third-person action game has some of the most spectacular use of force powers ever seen, allowing you to pull down a Star Destroyer at one point. While it's let down by some fiddly QTE sections and some generally weak bosses, the insane amount of power you have at your fingertips more than makes up for it. Avoid the terrible sequel though.



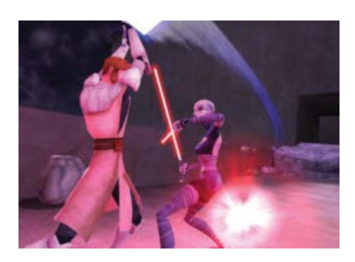


STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS – LIGHTSABER DUELS 2008

WII

While using a Wii Remote as a lightsaber is blindingly obvious, it couldn't help developer Krome Studios make a good game. As with *Soul Calibur Legends* the fighting always feels flaky and imprecise and you never feel fully in control of your actions. A disappointingly bland fighter.









STAR WARS: THE OLD REPUBLIC 2011

PC

BioWare's own stab at the MMORPG is a far better attempt than Sony's, currently boasts a million live subscribers and is still running today. Players are able to become members of either the Sith Empire or Galactic Empire, choose from a number of different races and have access to numerous classes. Moral choices can affect gameplay, while players can permanently open and close storylines. It's currently supported by five expansions, with a level cap of 65.

ANGRY BIRDS STAR WARS 2012

IOS, VARIOUS

This is essentially a mash-up of Angry Birds and Angry Birds Space. It uses the classic *Angry Birds* formulae but gives many of the existing birds brand new abilities to use, which unlock as you make your way through the different planets. The Millennium Falcon replaces the Mighty Eagle of earlier games and can also be rewarded once a set number of stars are earned. A sequel followed in 2013.



KINECT STAR WARS 2012

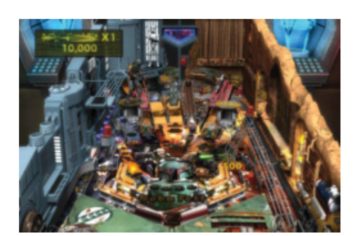
XBOX 360

Despite some truly interesting gameplay modes that range from podracing to having a dance off in Jabba The Hutt's palace, *Kinect Star Wars* is a mess. While it looks wonderful and has some neat ideas (who doesn't want to run amok as a rancor?) it's let down by incredibly imprecise controls that make its five stages a chore to play.

STAR WARS PINBALL 2013

VARIOUS

Zen Studios has released a number of excellent pinball tables for both Zen Pinball and Pinball FX. *Star Wars Pinball* included a table based around *The Clone Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, as well as the popular bounty hunter Boba Fett. Balance Of The Force followed the same year and added three more tables, while *Heroes Of The Force* was released in 2014 and added four more. Two additional tables have been released to tie in with *The Force Awakens*.





STAR WARS: GALAXY OF HEROES 2015

IOS, ANDROID

Assemble a squad of heroes and take on other players and a rather lengthy campaign. While *Galaxy Of Heroes* has some surprisingly absorbing gameplay and plenty of classic characters to unlock, most of the good content is behind some very steep micro transactions. If you don't mind grinding however, you'll find it to be a surprisingly diverting timewaster.





DISNEY INFINITY 3.0 2015

VARIOUS

After its disappointing jaunt in the Marvel universe, Disney's third *Infinity* game was far more rewarding and has been supplemented by some brilliant models. In addition to featuring a far more intuitive sandbox for creating new games in the Toybox mode, the three *Star Wars* playsets that are available are far more entertaining with more interesting and varied missions.



STAR WARS BATTLEPOD 2015

ARCADE

Namco Bandai's first arcade blaster is superb, and plays like a hypercharged version of Sega's *Star Wars Trilogy Arcade*. It's a hectic on-rails shooter that's based on the first three films, but also features a new level where you play as Darth Vader after his defeat at the end of *A New Hope*.

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT 2015

VARIOUS

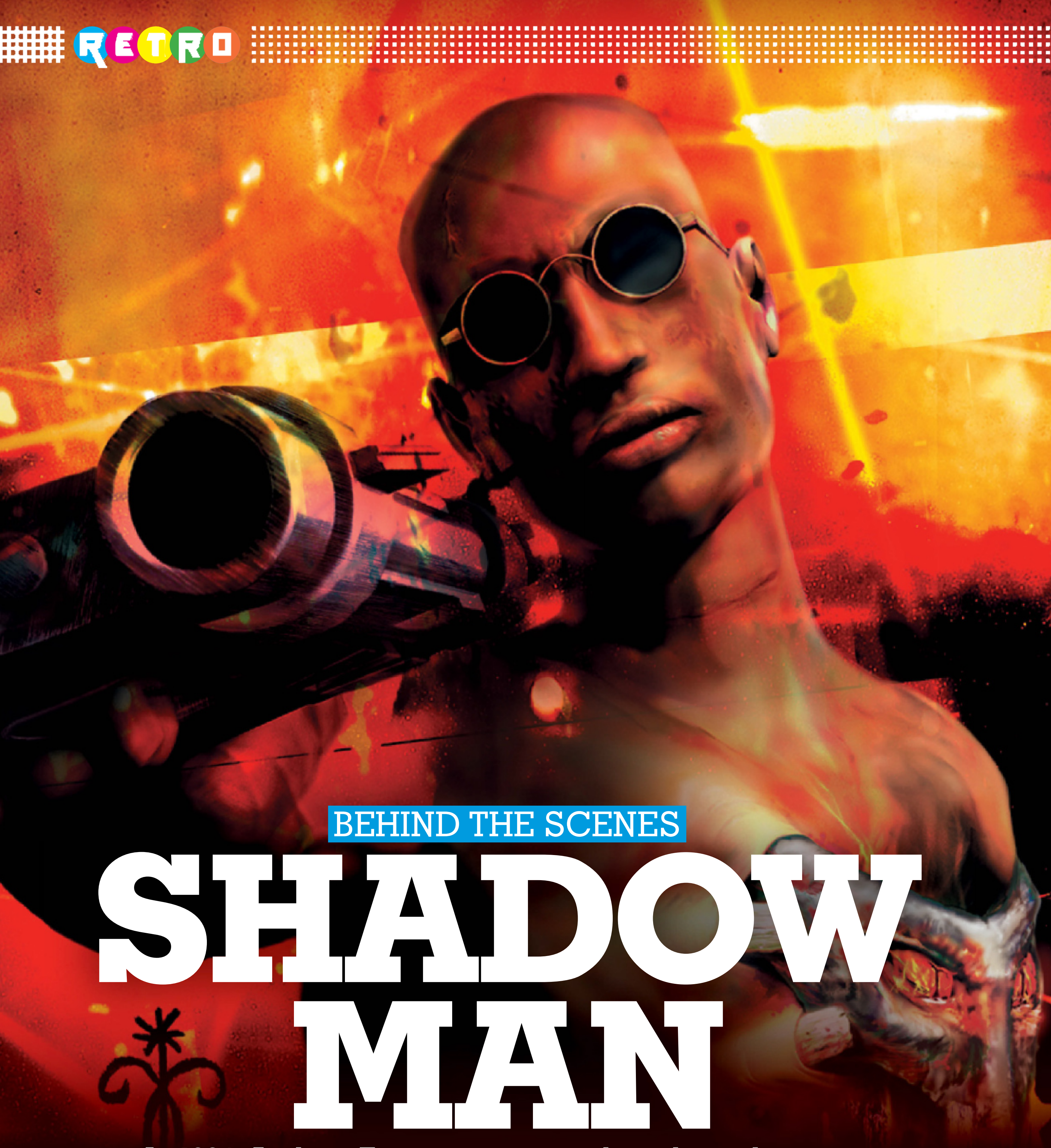
A *Battlefront* game by DICE sounds sublime, but the reality is that this is a weak adaptation of the earlier *Battlefront* game that is low on gameplay modes and decent maps. The free content that has appeared is welcome and the aesthetics are incredible, but DICE is going to have to work a lot harder with any planned sequel.



EVEN MORE STAR WARS

In case you still need things to play...

- STAR WARS REBELLION (1998)
- STAR WARS: ROGUE SQUADRON (1998)
- STAR WARS MILLENNIUM FALCON CD-ROM PLAYSET (1998)
- STAR WARS: YODA'S CHALLENGE (1999)
- STAR WARS EPISODE 1: THE GUNGAN FRONTIER (1999)
- STAR WARS: EPISODE 1 – THE PHANTOM MENACE (1999)
- STAR WARS: DROID WORKS (1999)
- STAR WARS: DEMOLITION (2000)
- STAR WARS: RACER ARCADE (2000)
- STAR WARS: ANAKIN'S SPEEDWAY (2000)
- STAR WARS EPISODE 1: JEDI POWER BATTLES (2000)
- STAR WARS EPISODE 1: BATTLE FOR NABOO (2000)
- STAR WARS: OBI-WAN (2001)
- STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS (2002)
- STAR WARS: BOUNTY HUNTER (2002)
- STAR WARS RACER REVENGE (2002)
- STAR WARS: THE NEW DROID ARMY (2002)
- STAR WARS: JEDI STARFIGHTER (2002)
- STAR WARS ROGUE SQUADRON III: REBEL STRIKE (2003)
- STAR WARS: FLIGHT OF THE FALCON (2003)
- STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY (2003)
- STAR WARS TRILOGY: APPRENTICE OF THE FORCE (2004)
- STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT MOBILE (2005)
- STAR WARS: EPISODE III – REVENGE OF THE SITH (2005)
- STAR WARS: JEDI ASSASSIN (2005)
- STAR WARS: LIGHTSABER COMBAT (2005)
- STAR WARS: REPUBLIC COMMANDO: ORDER 66 (2005)
- STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS (2005)
- STAR WARS: PUZZLE BLASTER (2005)
- STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (2005)
- STAR WARS: LETHAL ALLIANCE (2006)
- STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT: RENEGADE SQUADRON (2007)
- STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS – JEDI ALLIANCE (2008)
- STAR WARS: JEDI READING (2008)
- STAR WARS: LIVE FIRE (2008)
- STAR WARS: JEDI MATH (2008)
- STAR WARS: THE CLONE WARS – REPUBLIC HEROES (2009)
- STAR WARS: TRENCH RUN (2009)
- STAR WARS: JEDI TRIALS (2009)
- STAR WARS: FALCON GUNNER (2010)
- STAR WARS: BATTLE OF HOTH (2010)
- STAR WARS: THE FORCE UNLEASHED II (2010)



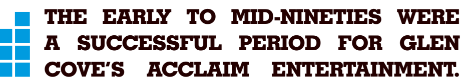
BEHIND THE SCENES

SHADOW MAN

In 1994, Acclaim Entertainment purchased popular comic publisher Valiant. First came Turok – then this gothic tale of Michael LeRoi, a voodoo warrior charged with protecting the world of the living – from the world of the dead…



Released: 1999
Format: Dreamcast, Nintendo 64, PlayStation, PC
Publisher: Acclaim Entertainment Inc.
Key Staff: Jason Falcus (studio head and development director), Simon Phipps, Guy Miller (game and level design, story), Paul Taylor, Jonathan Ackerley (programming), Trevor Storey, Nick Patrick (art, level design), Tim Haywood (audio)



THE EARLY TO MID-NINETIES WERE A SUCCESSFUL PERIOD FOR GLEN COVE'S ACCLAIM ENTERTAINMENT. *Mortal Kombat* was raking in the dollars, and with the millions invested by cable company Tele-Communications Inc burning a hole in its pocket, Acclaim was looking for companies to acquire. Valiant Entertainment was founded in 1989, partly by famous Marvel alumni Jim Shooter and Bob Layton. The comics industry was fast approaching its peak, which was reached around 4-5 years later when Valiant's venture-capital investor, Triumph, sold Valiant to Acclaim. As Acclaim CEO, Greg Fischbach, told **Retro Gamer**, "We paid 75 million dollars [for Valiant] and lost a shitload of money. It was a banker. They were the third biggest comics company, and we were looking for something else to invest in." Acclaim took over publication of Valiant's line of comics, and naturally eyed up several titles as potential videogames. "But we bought into the comic book business right at the top of the market," continued Fischbach, "and then all of a sudden it starts to fall apart. And we rode it all the way down."

Acclaim's first cross-media product was an obvious choice in *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*. Dinosaurs were back in vogue thanks to the *Jurassic Park* franchise and *Turok* became a massive hit, particularly on the Nintendo 64. It was developed by Iguana Entertainment, based in Austin, Texas, and in addition to Valiant, Acclaim was busy acquiring more games developers and subsuming them as satellite development studios. In the UK, Optimus Software, founded by Jason and Darren Falcus in 1988, would become part of the American company.

"We were a small team in the north east of England, working on games for a few major publishers such as *Codemasters* and *Gremlin*," explains Jason Falcus. "Our first employee, Adrian Ludley, emigrated to the U.S. and ended up working for Iguana Entertainment." When Ludley hooked up his former employers with the CEO of his new company, Optimus Software soon became Iguana UK and subsequently Acclaim Studios Teesside when it purchased Iguana Entertainment. After the success of *Turok*, Valiant's line of comics were scrutinised for further possible videogame franchises. Continues Falcus, "Acclaim sent a load of Valiant comics to our studio and asked us if we'd like to pitch for a game based on any of them. We looked through them all and *Shadow Man* stood out as being perfect for the transition to videogame. We felt it filled the gap in the market for a platform adventure game with a darker, more mature theme, as well as a rich storyline."



WE BOUGHT INTO THE COMIC BOOK BUSINESS RIGHT AT THE TOP OF THE MARKET
Greg Fischbach, Acclaim CEO

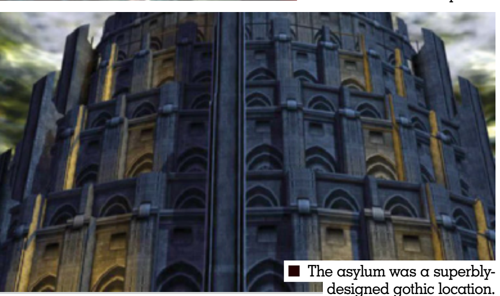
Shadow Man is the story of Michael LeRoi, an undead voodoo warrior caught between two worlds: our world, the Liveside, and the Deadside, a grim and dangerous place where all souls eventually locate. The game begins in 1888 as legendary serial killer Jack the Ripper prepares to take his own life, disappointed the unearthly powers his killing spree was meant to unlock has not materialised. Enter Legion, a powerful being seeking to recruit five serial killers, each harbouring a dark soul that he plans to use to create an immortal army. Legion's target: Liveside.

Acclaim Teesside assembled a team of approximately 20 people to work on *Shadow Man*. A budget and timescale were set although, as was fast becoming common, these evolved over time as the scope of the game was extended. Development began in 1997. Creative director Guy Miller and senior designer Simon Phipps began storyboarding their ideas on how the game would work; graphic artists such as Trevor Storey and Nick Patrick began digitizing this vision, and a group of programmers including Paul Taylor and Jonathan Ackerley set about organising the nuts and bolts beneath the hood. Ex-Ocean audio expert Tim Haywood was another vital cog in the *Shadow Man* machine.

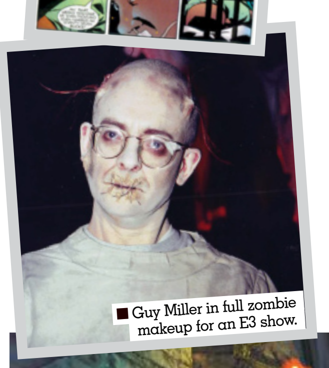
On his personal website, Phipps details a slightly different account of how the *Shadow Man* project started.



Some of the Acclaim Teesside staff relax in a local pub around the time of *Shadow Man*'s development.



The asylum was a superbly-designed gothic location.



Guy Miller in full zombie makeup for an E3 show.



Shadowman offered a wide array of interesting demonic enemies to take on throughout the game.



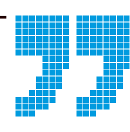


The game created a fantastic mix of otherworldly imagery against the backdrop of familiar locations.

WHAT THEY SAID...

The game is massive, very atmospheric, and strangely addictive. It should keep you busy for a week or two at least, and if you've got the patience, it's well worth a dabble

Eurogamer, 1999, PC Version



"We were asked by Acclaim's head office in New York to come up with a 3D horror adventure…along the lines of *Resident Evil*, but in full 3D." A small team within Acclaim Teesside created a proposal that focused on Thomas Deacon, an ex-NYPD policeman who had assumed a new career as a demon hunter. Phipps also recalls the material Teesside was sent when its proposal was not taken up. "The comics were *Ninjak*, *Magnus Robot Fighter*, *Bloodshot*, *Trinity Angels* and *Shadow Man*, penned by Garth Ennis and illustrated by Ashley Wood…[*Shadow Man*] had been running for about five issues, so it was very easy for us to slot into the timeline and expand the world of Deadside. The premise we worked under was, simply, that if there is no Heaven or Hell and everyone who dies goes to Deadside, then what happens when the really bad people get organised and decide they want to come back?"

Studio head and development director Jason Falcus kept a close on eye on all the different projects within Acclaim Teesside. "But *Shadow Man* was very close to my heart," he says, "as it was an opportunity for us to show we could create a new game IP, and make our mark as a creative force. It was an excellent storyline – it took the main characters from the comic and added in a fantastic mix of original characters and some really imaginative locations between the two worlds," says Falcus. "Jack the Ripper was a particularly brilliant addition. I don't recall we considered other real-life serial killers, but I'm sure they were heavily inspired!"

IT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR US TO SHOW WE COULD CREATE A NEW GAME IP, AND MAKE OUR MARK AS A CREATIVE FORCE

Acclaim Teesside's Jason Falcus

However, as coder Paul Taylor explains, another Valiant property was also being developed concurrently. "I joined in 1997 and worked on a game based on another of Valiant's characters, Bloodshot," he reveals. "There wasn't much to *Shadow Man* at that stage, but the plan was to use its game engine to give *Bloodshot* a jump start." With the latter project suffering from a lack of direction and a focus on PlayStation to PC development (which caused the eventual dropping of the *Shadow Man* engine and too much time spent rebuilding the tech), it was inevitable that *Bloodshot* would be put on



Trevor Storey relaxes in Acclaim Teesside's rec room.



■ A selection of Trevor Storey's Shadow Man memorabilia.

hold as *Shadow Man* grew steadily. "I was absorbed into it to help with gameplay programming on the PC version," recalls Taylor, "and this typically involved receiving a large sheet of paper with a map of the game level, the level mesh and a bunch of assets from the artists. It was my job to plug these together so that all the tricks and traps worked, doors unlocked when you operated a particular button, cable cars moved when you entered them, cut scenes triggered at the right moment, and so on."

But perhaps Taylor's most vital role was the creation of an animation system. "The artists could animate characters just fine, but there was nothing in place for other objects, which had to be done in code. This included doors opening and closing, sliding platforms and, the one I'm most proud of, a big hammer that swings down and strikes a monolith, forming a bridge." The PC version of *Shadow Man* was initially its only planned platform. Having had much success on various consoles, Acclaim was keen to grow its PC market share. When the game expanded to consoles, Acclaim held back the completed lead PC version as the other versions were finalised.

While the driving force of the story remained with Phipps and Miller, artists such as Nick Patrick and Trevor Storey also had important roles in shaping the unusual look and design of *Shadow Man*. "I started as lead artist and worked as a level builder, effects and front-end designer," says Storey, "I thought the story was cracking and [it] really swept us along during development." Nick Patrick, who began as a concept artist on the project, agrees. "Guy and Simon really pushed to keep a story to the game and make it unnerving and unsettling. I worked quite closely with Trevor, and we had to keep a consistent look to the levels. I do remember we played a lot of *Quake* at lunch time back then – I think he must have been losing at one point when his mouse took off and hit me on the back of the head!"

Shadow Man was a complicated development in terms of both design and realisation. With both Phipps and Miller having worked at Core Design, comparisons with *Tomb Raider* were inevitable – if a little off the mark, according to Falcus. "The success [of *Tomb Raider*] helped us appreciate the potential for such a game," he admits, "but I would say the main inspirations were games such as *Mario 64* and *Zelda*. These titles both utilised expanding 3D worlds, and we loved the way they were based around a central hub, and the world expanded as the player increased their abilities." The team also preferred the dynamic controls that Nintendo platform games often honed to perfection. Continues Falcus, "We wanted to emulate that. I used to get very frustrated by the animation-driven controls of the early *Tomb Raider* games." The central hub created its own set of design issues. While *Shadow Man*'s storyline and plot was relatively simple for Phipps and Miller, the construction of the various levels was not so.

With the game requiring the player to revisit locations from earlier in the game, and be able to explore further thanks to new weapons and abilities, considerable thought and planning was needed to ensure everything operated logically. The designers discovered that the easiest (and fastest) technique was to sketch out each level on paper before passing it on to the world modellers to build, texture and light it. With the comic version of



VALIANTLY GOING FORTH

A short history of Valiant Videogames

TUROK: DINOSAUR HUNTER

A European launch game for the Nintendo 64, Acclaim's version of the loin-clothed beast-slayer was a big hit and paved the way for multiple sequels. Developed by Iguana Entertainment (Acclaim Studios in Austin, Texas), the first-person-shooter had its faults, but benefitted from a dearth of similar titles on the N64. The mixed reviews of 2008's Turok on the Xbox 360 and PS3 appear to have ended the franchise for now. Acclaim itself bowed out with *Turok: Evolution* in 2002.



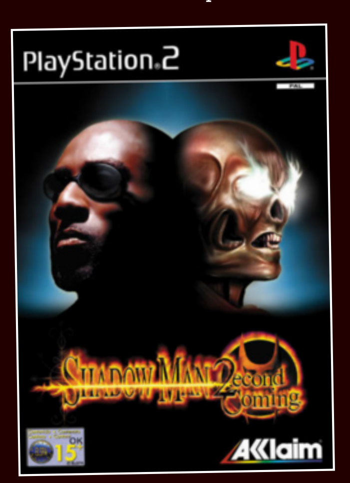


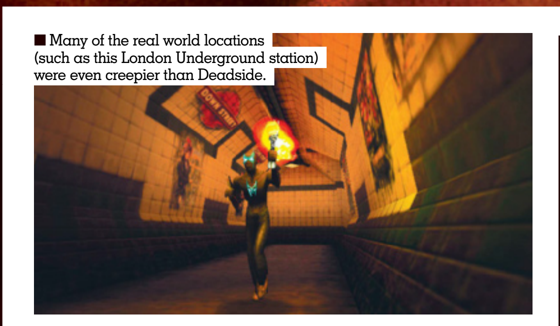
ARMORINES

Created as an adversary for superhero X-O Manowar, the Armorines were a government-sponsored team of super marine soldiers, and a logical choice for a videogame. Another first-person shooter, the game used the same engine as *Turok 2*, but was received badly, and poor sales ensured there would be no further titles in the series. A shame, as its *Starship Troopers* man vs. the bugs theme could have been a winner had it been better implemented.

SHADOW MAN

Despite a botched PlayStation port, the original *Shadow Man* sold decently enough to ensure a sequel was optioned, although given the original's poor effort on the Sony console, it was a little strange that *Shadow Man: 2econd Coming* should only see release on the PlayStation 2. The plot of the sequel more-or-less mirrors the first game, with armageddon this time threatened by a pair of demons known as Asmodeus and Grigori. The collapse of Acclaim two years later spelled doom for the series, although the comic was rebooted for a short time in 2012.




Many of the real world locations (such as this London Underground station) were even creepier than Deadside.

Deadside a black and desolate area, it was left to the imagination of the art department to give this part of the game its detailed and unearthly look. Says Patrick, "I worked quite a bit on the asylum, so those were my favourite parts. The level design was well-planned, but when I look back now, I'm surprised how sparse it feels in places. There are quite a few long corridors with not much in; you wouldn't get away with that these days!" The asylum is a superbly-designed part of *Shadow Man*, and also used as a hub for some of the game's later levels. "Some of my favourite sections were those in the asylum," agrees Falcus, "which I think was down to the weird and wonderful creatures, and also the New York tenement building which was very atmospheric and creepy."

Technically, *Shadow Man* was also a huge challenge for the studio. "We had to build all of the 3D tech and tools, including our own engine, called VISTA," continues Falcus. "The design was ambitious, requiring large interior and exterior locations with seamless transitions – which at the time was quite unusual. We also wanted a dynamic animation blending system so we could have a more versatile character control system. This allowed Shadow Man to run while aiming his two weapons in different directions." Mike LeRoi also possessed uncanny athletic abilities, his slender figure leaping around each level, grasping ledges with one hand and taking out assorted demons with the other. All of the game's controls needed to be fine-tuned so that these complex moves operated correctly.

Another, perhaps overlooked, element of *Shadow Man* was its sound design. Former Ocean Software employee Tim Haywood, having been made redundant from the Manchester company, was recommended by another ex-Ocean worker who now coded for the Tees developer. "They didn't have any audio staff at all, so I had to start from scratch and set up a studio myself," says Haywood. "It was exciting because I had nothing more than a PC, Sound Forge, a simple recording device and one sample CD." Haywood improvised to begin with, before approval for additional equipment was granted. Soon the department had expanded to include a Kurzweil K2500R (a synthesizer), vocal processor, semi-acoustic guitar and a large sample library.

Haywood's first job was providing all of the audio for *Shadow Man*. "I was audio director, composer, sound designer, audio tester, voice casting, voice director, actor, dialogue editor, audio implementer, and trade show evangelist," he grins. "And it really was a blank page. We

SHADOW MAN GETS CUT

Coder Paul Taylor explains how a tragic real-life incident affected Shadow Man



"It came right at the end when we were finishing off the PC version. The infamous Columbine school massacre took place in April 1999, and this led to the sudden and arguably misguided opinion that violent video games were a key factor. I believe Acclaim CEO Greg Fischbach was called before a senate committee investigating the issue, or something like that. Afterwards, as a result of what was discussed, or nervousness about the public perception of violent videogames, the order came through that *Shadow Man*'s content should be toned down. Gore was cut down across the board, and as quickly as possible. I got an interesting bug caused by this rapid censoring. There was one room where the tiled ceiling bled if you shot it. The collision detection was reporting the bullet was hitting flesh, so I traced it through thinking it must be going wrong and thinking it's hitting something else, possibly outside the room. The trace didn't find anything broken, but it did reveal that there was a body pinned to the ceiling with surgical instruments. In a rush to hide this, they'd simply removed the textures, rendering it invisible. There are rumours of pre-Columbine copies of *Shadow Man* floating around out there, but I've never seen one."

WE LITERALLY TOOK THE PC VERSION AND DROPPED IT STRAIGHT INTO THE DREAMCAST COMPILER. OF COURSE, IT DIDN'T WORK

Coder Paul Taylor



> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Tomb Raider > Shadow Man > Mirror's Edge



Tomb Raider encapsulated the running, jumping and shooting of endangered species gameplay.



Mirror's Edge focused totally on acrobatics and movement, and was none the worse for it.







I am simply flabbergasted at how awful it looks and plays. Why did Acclaim try to force this game onto PlayStation while the PC and N64 versions look, play and feel so good?

IGN, 1999, PlayStation version

had the comic books as a reference, and I talked to Guy [Miller] and we picked various film references to draw from. The rest of the audio came from the visual style of the game and how it made me feel."

The prime version of *Shadow Man* [PC] implemented the Miles Sound System; primitive by today's standards, highly effective in 1999. "When you walked through the different areas of a level, you heard ambient sound coming from lots of places, and it blended very nicely for the time," recounts Haywood, who despite the smaller storage of the Nintendo 64, used compression technology to squeeze the speech and music into the cartridge. "We just downgraded the quality where we needed to, to make things fit. The PlayStation version suffered the most and had only 90 sound effects from the original 600."

Ah, the PlayStation port. While the PC, N64 and Dreamcast versions of *Shadow Man* were all well-received, with critics praising the game's atmosphere and playability, things were a little different over on the Sony console. "Acclaim decided very late in the day that they wanted a PlayStation version," laments Falcus. "Basically because it was the biggest platform at the time." Unfortunately, a lack of experience with the console, coupled with extreme time pressure meant the port was vastly inferior. It was also an unusual move for Acclaim who up to that point had forged a decent reputation based on its support of the Nintendo consoles. "We understood their reasoning – it was a big opportunity to get the game on the biggest platform. But it was a technical nightmare to execute and we weren't very happy with the end result."

Sales were also unimpressive compared to the Nintendo 64 in particular, probably a reflection of the mass of similar arcade adventures on the PlayStation. Mature-themed games were rarer on the N64, and *Shadow Man* neatly occupied that vacant niche. And on the Dreamcast, things were even better, as the powerful Sega console barely broke a sweat emulating the PC version and contained optimised controls due to the lack of a keyboard.

"We literally took the PC version and dropped it straight into the Dreamcast compiler," says programmer Paul Taylor. "Of course, it didn't work…but then we chopped out all the PC-specific code until the compiler stopped complaining. But I was quite proud of it and the team behind it – we managed to pull off a decent conversion in the six months we originally estimated. Just about."


■ The Nintendo 64 version was excellent, and comparable graphically to the PC game.




■ Mike travels between the two worlds using his final earthly possession: a teddy bear given to him by his dying brother.

While it is inevitable that development of such a complex game caused minor disagreements, the learning experience that it became for the majority of the Acclaim Teesside team means most look back on its creation with fondness. "I loved that time," recalls Storey, "it was working with a fab bunch, many of whom I'm still friends with today. The game wasn't perfect, but it turned out real nice." Storey's colleague in the art and design department, Nick Patrick, adds, "I learnt a great deal from *Shadow Man*. It was the first big 3D game that Acclaim Teesside produced as the whole industry was changing with longer development times, bigger teams and larger financial risks. It was tough – when the game went into crunch development, I seem to remember Tim [Haywood] was spotted wandering the corridors one night – he had been sleeping in his office and got up for a comfort break."

In reality, Haywood had been living at Acclaim for some time during the development of *Shadow Man*, but still greatly enjoyed the development experience. "I lived there for about a year and had a room with a bed. There were showers and a kitchen, so I had all that I needed. But it was, and still is the best game development experience I ever had. The way it was made is the way games should be made, with deep immersion within the subject matter and total passion for the process and content." Studio head Jason Falcus admits he learned much too, considering his management role on the game. "I learned a lot about developing large scale, original console games with a large team," he says, "and am proud to have been involved with *Shadow Man*. It was an ambitious project, but I think in the end it was an excellent game, and one that people still talk about today."



RETRO

INTERVIEW

CHRIS SAWYER

Chris Sawyer is one of the pioneer developers of business simulation games, with his creations still holding a devoted audience to this day. **games™** speaks with the brains behind the Tycoon

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Transport Tycoon
(1994)
Designer/Programmer



RollerCoaster Tycoon
(1999)
Designer/Programmer



Chris Sawyer's Locomotion
(2004)
Designer/Programmer

How did you begin your videogames career?
While at school and university I think I just saw games programming as a hobby, maybe something I could make a little money with on the side while doing a "serious" job. Even when I started doing game conversion work after graduating I felt it was probably just a stop-gap until I got a real job, but it kind of took off from there really and I realised I could actually make a living from games programming.

What sorts of games inspired your earliest days of programming?
I was fascinated with Sid Meier's original *Railroad Tycoon* game – I played it for hours and hours, definitely my favourite game at the time. The viewpoint was just an overhead 2D map though, and I wondered whether my favourite isometric viewpoint would be better, and whether other modes of transport should be included – I was inspired. I think eventually I tried *Civilization* too but didn't really get on too well with it, I could see it was a very good game but it just didn't have the appeal of *Railroad Tycoon* for me. The only other PC game I remember playing a lot at that time was Geoff Crammond's *Formula One Grand Prix*, and to this day I've still to find another driving game I enjoy as much as I remember enjoying that one.

What was the most important element of *Transport Tycoon* you wanted to get right?
The complexity was what it was all about for me – creating a simulation where everything affected everything else so that nothing was irrelevant. Even things like trees growing and dying and seeding themselves out, or towns slowly expanding or contracting, they all happen for a reason and they all affect the player and what the player does also affects them too. Implementing this level of complexity was actually surprisingly easy, but getting it balanced was challenging. Making sure that the game world didn't do undesirable things when left to its own devices, and making sure the player could actually make money and enjoy building and interacting in the game world. Things like the signalling were possibly an over-indulgence on my part as I think I wanted the game to have a bit of a "model railway" look and feel to it. It could have been simplified and still worked well as a game, but I just wanted to have that little bit more realism for the trains.

I LOVE SEEING HOW PEOPLE PLAY MY GAMES IN DIFFERENT WAYS – I THINK THAT'S WHAT GIVES ME THE BIGGEST BUZZ


Hutbridge

You had a couple of others helping you out with the game's art and sound, did you have a particular vision for these elements? Did you exert much pressure over these two areas?

Graphically I had a relatively clear vision of what I wanted to achieve, and luckily Simon was able to carry that vision forward and in the process created a graphical style that he carried forward into my later games. Bitmaps needed to be certain sizes and to a certain scale, in a restricted palette of colours, and I had to ensure Simon knew exactly what was needed – I think I was on the phone to him every morning, he'd produce the next set of bitmaps during the day, then stick a 3.5-inch disc into the post and I'd receive it the next morning, all very efficient! For the sound and music I was much more hands-off – Microprose supplied the sound driver code and the sound effects themselves after I gave them a list of what I needed, and of course John Broomhall was inspired enough to write a collection of original pieces of jazz music.

The open-ended gameplay of *Transport Tycoon* was a big selling point for the game, how did you feel about how players were enjoying the game?

I love seeing how people play my games in different ways – I think that's what gives me the biggest buzz of all. Games like *Transport Tycoon* are basically just a framework, within which people can play in so many different ways, some of which I'd never even thought of when I designed the game. *Transport Tycoon* and *RollerCoaster Tycoon* let people express their own personality within the game rather than having to adapt to the game's personality, and perhaps that's why so many people enjoy these games.

***Transport Tycoon* ended up being a pretty big success, how did you feel about it at the time?**

I still have magazine clippings of the previews and reviews and was amazed at the time with how positively the game was received, and I loved seeing the full-page screenshots splashed through the articles, and even on the covers of one or two magazines! I think at that point I had no doubt the game would be a success and at least pay back the development costs, and the months that followed showed that to be the case. The game sold very well in the UK, most of Europe, and Japan (we'd done a special Kanji language version), but struggled in the USA.



RollerCoaster Tycoon was by far the biggest success for Chris Sawyer.

When you moved onto *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, did you also want to create a deep simulation as with *Transport Tycoon*?

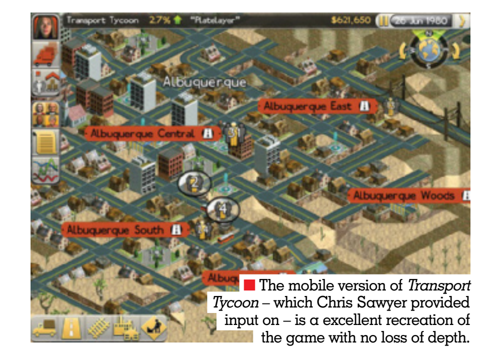
The great thing about *RollerCoaster Tycoon* is that it appears to be complex but under the skin it's actually relatively simple, perhaps more so than *Transport Tycoon*. It's all the little interactions between the various elements that give the game depth, and although these interactions are relatively simple to program they create a significant impression of complexity. I think one of the goals I had for the game was that everything in the game should have significance and should affect other things, so for instance the scenery isn't just there to make the game look good, the little people actually notice the scenery and it affects their thoughts and feelings and ultimately affects what they do. Another goal with the game design was to ensure the ride types all had pros and cons, so part of the challenge (and fun) of the game was learning how to design each type of ride as good as it can be and learning how best to use that ride in a park. And finally I wanted the little people in the game to be the measure of success in the game – if you design your park and rides well and run your park effectively the little people will enjoy it and will be happy.



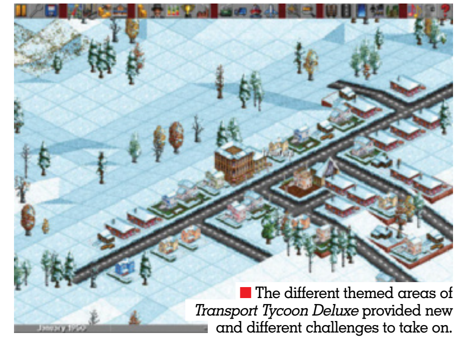
Transport Tycoon's randomised town names gave the game a uniquely British vibe (though an American option was available).

SIMON FOSTER ON WORKING WITH CHRIS

> I'd come back to the UK on the empty promise of a partnership with an old work colleague and been left unemployed. I put together some images and gave them to my brother who worked at another publishing house, he gave them to the editor of an Amiga magazine. Now he'd been sent a *Frogger* style game that he liked but the graphics weren't up to much, so he put me and the programmer in touch with each other. Once I'd shown that I could do the most important thing a designer can do, which is finish the job on time, he put me in touch with a mate of his who had this game about trains...



The mobile version of *Transport Tycoon* – which Chris Sawyer provided input on – is a excellent recreation of the game with no loss of depth.



The different themed areas of *Transport Tycoon Deluxe* provided new and different challenges to take on.

Was there anything in particular that inspired you to make *RollerCoaster Tycoon*?
I'd played the original version of *Theme Park* and enjoyed it, but its lack of detail with the roller coasters frustrated me and I always felt it needed a more three-dimensional look to it. Perhaps that's what started me thinking of developing my own roller coaster game? I think I set out to make *RCT* a business game that didn't appear to be a business game – i.e. all the business type detail is in there like making decisions on what and where to build and running the park and looking after money and loans, but the player doesn't really need to notice the business side if they understand what the game is all about – creating a fun environment to keep the little people happy.



I'D PLAYED THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF THEME PARK AND ENJOYED IT, BUT ITS LACK OF DETAIL FRUSTRATED ME

The piece-by-piece construction of rides in *RollerCoaster Tycoon* helped to give the players creative control, was this a challenge to enable?
Building things in three-dimensions on a two-dimensional screen is always going to be tricky, and I think *RCT* probably frustrated many players while they tried to learn how to build things – I didn't want to "dumb down" the construction process though, as I felt that would take away one of the challenges of the game, i.e. learning to build fun rides. I hoped that players would start to realise the importance of every single piece of curved or straight or sloped track they build as they all affect how the train runs, and ultimately affects how the little people react when they ride the ride.

What did you want to achieve with the sequel?
I think the success of *RollerCoaster Tycoon* gave me a new impetus to take another look at every aspect of the game and see what could be improved, and basically just make the game bigger and better. I didn't want to change the fundamentals, but given the time and budget there were many things I wanted to improve and add, things which there just wasn't time to do with the original game.

For me, *RollerCoaster Tycoon 2* became the definitive version of the game – I put in as many types of roller coaster as I could, I added more scenery and more flexible ways of building scenery, I put in a park editor and a track designer, designed ways for tracks and park scenarios to be saved so players could exchange them, added more AI and animations for the people, and generally tried to improve everything that was in the game.



As a spiritual successor to *Transport Tycoon*, *Locomotion* provided a lot of the same sort of gameplay – but wasn't received as well by fans.

You've helped out on *Transport Tycoon* for iOS and mobile. Do you think the platform is a good match for simulation games like this?
I think it's a style of game that really suits these latest mobile and tablet platforms – It's almost like things have come full circle. Back when I created *TT* and *RCT* on the PC the timing was perfect as the games suited the mouse-driven high-res displays that were just becoming available, and now we have even higher-res touch-screens, which also suit the style of game perfectly, where you can basically have the world in your lap and point and move things with your finger, it just seems to really suit this style of games.

Was it a challenge to bring a game like *Transport Tycoon* over to mobile and tablet?
I haven't directly worked on the mobile platforms, that's been down to Origin8's team of programmers, but working with them has given me a good insight into the development process for iOS and Android. One of the biggest challenges for the team was trying to get the mobile device's display system to cope with the style of graphics the game needed. For all the power and functionality of the graphics chips on modern hardware it's very difficult to persuade it to do something it wasn't designed to do, like pixel-mapped graphics rather than polygons or sprites.

Another big challenge was how to make the game completely playable with only touches and gestures (especially difficult on a tiny mobile phone screen) while still keeping the depth and complexity of the game. When Origin8 took on the project I don't think they realised exactly how much of a challenge they had taken on and it's all credit to them that they managed to stick with it and managed to complete it without compromising the game's detail or depth.

GAME CHANGERS

QUAKE

Released: 22 June 1996 **Publisher:** GT Interactive **Developer:** id Software **System:** PC, Mac, Saturn, N64, Linux, Amiga



Quake's contributions are often overlooked, but this is the game that truly set the template for arena shooters and made online multiplayer FPS possible

Were it not for Quake, the state of gaming would be very different. It's the FPS that made 3D space feel real for the very first time

WHAT DO YOU remember of 1996? For many a gamer, it was a year tied up in the whine of a dial-up connection; screams of discontent parents echoing throughout neighbourhoods as homes were made unreachable in the evenings, the phone line sacrificed to the alter of *Quake*. It's almost impossible to picture it now – a world where the internet wasn't a necessity for gaming, but a luxury afforded to those lucky to be on the frontlines of a revolution.

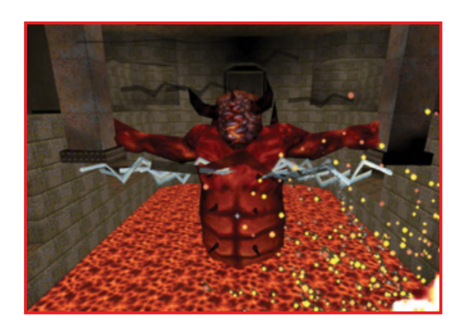
While *Quake* may not have made an immediate splash, like its stable mate *Doom*, it has become an essential part to the overall heritage of the shooter genre. It did so much to define and evolve the FPS that it ended up inadvertently shaping the future of gaming. It might not be the best game ever made, but there's a strong argument to be made for it being considered one of the most influential games of all time.

It's funny though; we almost ended up with something entirely different. id Software was eager to try and build something more expansive after the release of *Doom II* in '94; the earliest screenshots for *Quake* teased medieval mazes and dragons, yup, *Quake* was going to be more RPG than FPS. But towards the end of development everything changed.

Legendary figure John Carmack had seemingly gone completely insane, as the most creative figures have a tendency to do from time to time. He opted to not only develop an all-new 3D engine, one that would

BEST BOSSES

THE TOUGHEST ENEMY ENCOUNTERS IN QUAKE DETAILED



CHTHON

★ If you played *Quake* as a kid, Chthon was one of the most terrifying creatures ever designed, with its demonic face and its powerful lava attacks.



VORE

★ Think of this spider-like hybrid horror as *Quake*'s version of *Doom*'s Baron Of Hell. Keep an eye out for its homing ball, due to the significant damage it inflicts.



SHUB-NIGGURATH

★ The ruler of monsters and destroyed of worlds, Shub-Niggurath is a tentacle nightmare that arrives in the final moments of *Quake*. It's a classic, frantic fight.

later go on to push boundaries as it offered full real-time 3D rendering and early support for 3D acceleration; but an all new TCP/IP networking model that would revolutionise multiplayer gaming. The promise of the engine and network model, prompted id to consider that perhaps its development goals were too lofty and stripped *Quake* back to its Doom-y roots.

That's how we ended up with a science-fiction shooter set in bleak, gothic mazes. The Quake Engine that allowed id to create a tense and bloody single-player campaign that was technically stunning at the time, as well offering free all-axis viewing with the mouse; it was revolutionary for the genre, turning the flat corridor spaces ushered in by *Doom* into sprawling, truly three-dimensional labyrinths.

But really, when we look back on the legacy of *Quake*, it all comes down to the advancements it made to multiplayer. The network code provided by Carmack in the *QuakeWorld* patch was transformative; he discovered a way to make multiplayer gaming work reliably over dial-up connection. No longer was deathmatch constrained to LAN parties, but it could be played from anywhere you can move your PC, and at any time with people around the world. Suddenly we had an action game that didn't have to sacrifice its ferocity in an attempt to mitigate high latency modems. *Quake*'s fast and furious gunplay would thrive online. Its movement systems are legendary; players would gleefully bunny hop, strafe shoot and rocket jump their way through online gauntlets, the FPS was never the same again.

CONSIDER THE IMPOSSIBLE RISE OF ESPORTS: QUAKE IS EVEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THAT

KEY FACTS

- *Quake* was originally a combat focused RPG title featuring medieval environments and dragons. Because it switched focus late into development, many of these gothic themes can still be seen in its design today.
- John Carmack really outdid himself with *Quake's* 3D engine, making one of the first truly three-dimensional shooters. The verticality of the maps played a big part in its success in the multiplayer scene.

■■■ *Quake* was responsible for introducing a generation of gamers to the joys of modding and map creation. Consider even, the impossible rise of eSports, *Quake* is even responsible for that: Dennis Fong (often credited as the first professional gamer) famously won John Carmack's Ferrari 328 at a Microsoft-sponsored Red Annihilation tournament in 1997.

Quake will forever stand as an anomaly in the industry. It's such a strange game that you would struggle to imagine something like it releasing today. Its levels are expansive and vertical; it allowed players to cut their own paths through multiplayer arenas and use the environment as a tool for defensive and offensive plays – it was simply unheard of at the time. It was a slick and minimalist FPS game with a high skill ceiling; players have spent decades trying to master its tricky corridors and weapons.

But looking back at it, it's hard to understand the appeal unless you were there for it. The mix of stone and steel in the settings will immediately throw you off, while the off-kilter fantasy-overtones permeate through the Cthulhu-mythos monsters and even the rough-and-ready weapons. *Quake* doesn't have a clear message or intent – but it does have great gameplay, and that's what's maintained across two decades. There's an intrinsic thrill to be found in propelling yourself across a map with rockets, quickly slaying any player in your path. *Quake* is a true game changer, even if its larger contributions to the industry are overlooked in favour of *Doom* and *Wolfenstein*. The way it revolutionised multiplayer, online gaming and even the simple act of movement in a 3D space, has likely filtered down to every first-person game since in one way or another.



GAME CHANGERS

EIGHT GAMES WE WOULDN'T HAVE WITHOUT QUAKE

THE ARENA GAMES INSPIRED BY THE MULTIPLAYER MADNESS OF QUAKE



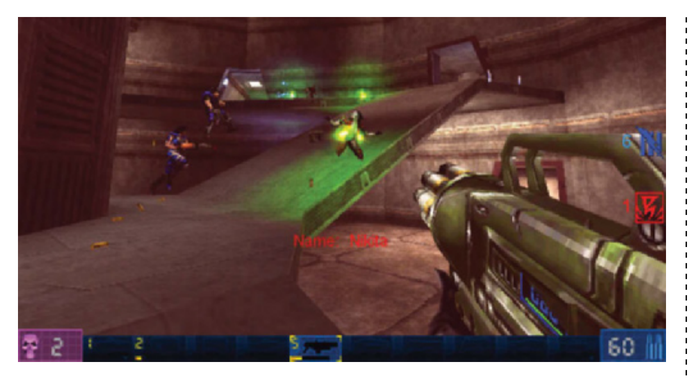
SHOOTMANIA STORM

■ Once positioned as the next big thing on the eSports scene, *Shootmania Storm* is the arena shooter reborn. This fast and furious first-person shooter took the classic *Quake* gameplay and stripped it back even further; each round kicks off with rocket launchers in the hands of every player, and that create a fair amount of chaos in the opening minutes.



RISE OF THE TRIAD

■ A remake of Apogee's 1995's *Dark War*, *Rise Of The Triad* was seen by many as something of a relic from the early age of shooters. It's entirely entrenched in outdated design ethos and mechanics – but that also makes it feel uniquely authentic. If you're after old-school action, *Rise Of The Triad* offers a simple and enduring splattering of arena action.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT

■ You can't really have a conversation about arena shooters without talking about *Unreal Tournament*. Despite being fundamentally different game experience, *UT* was always seen as a direct competitor to *Quake* by the late Nineties. Despite its age, *Unreal Tournament* still has a healthy player base online, thanks to its timeless mechanics and incredible level design.



DOOM 3

■ *Doom 3*'s multiplayer offering wasn't great at launch, but the community channelled the spirit of *Quake* and began modding it into shape. Once fans got their hands on it, *Quake* quickly found an active community as the multiplayer action was increased from four to sixteen players, new instant respawn game modes were added and plenty of crazy weapons arrived.



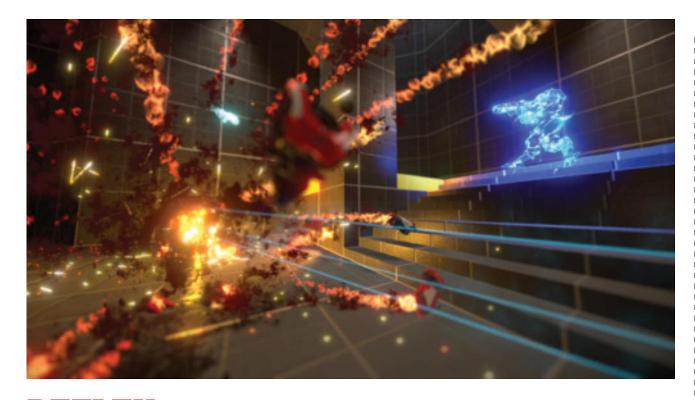
TRIBES ASCEND

■ *Tribes Ascend* might never have found the audience it truly deserved when it went into open beta in 2012, but it did always try to do things a little bit differently. A free-to-play FPS that spun out of the *Tribes* franchise, it put a huge emphasis on fun new weapon builds, interesting map design and interesting ranking systems to keep people involved.



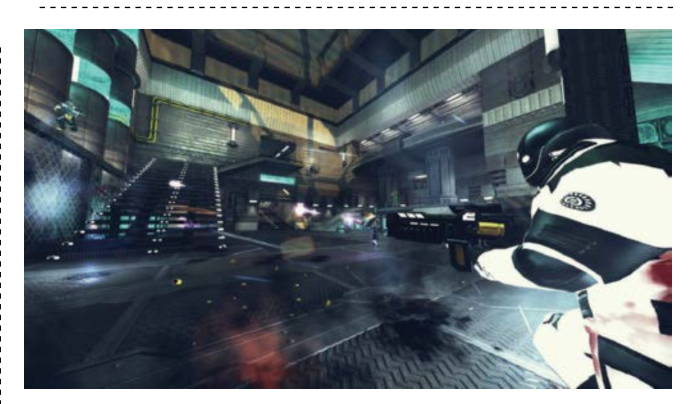
TOXIKK

■ Ridiculous spelling aside, *Toxikk* is another one of those arena shooters tenaciously dedicated to the past. While *Toxikk* clearly owes a great debt to *Unreal Tournament*, there's something about its considered movement and frantic combat that recalls fond memories of *Quake*. A focus on clan competition also keeps it fiercely boiling over on the competitive scene.



REFLEX

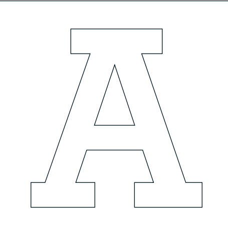
■ In essence, *Reflex* is a spiritual successor to the prominent *Quake III* mod Challenge ProMode Arena. Except everything has been tweaked to ensure it's chaotically destructive. Everything from damage, to momentum, weapon swap and reload speeds have been tweaked to ensure gunplay comes fast and furiously. This won't be for everyone, but *Reflex* offers a smart modernisation of old gameplay.



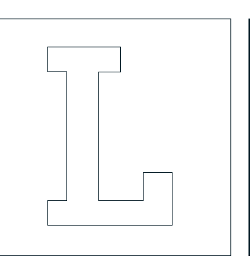
XONOTIC

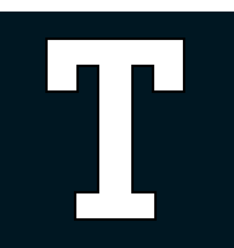
■ *Xonotic* feels like the arena shooter built for a modern, ever-insatiable audience. While its gameplay isn't that unchanged from the foundation laid down by *Quake* or *Unreal Tournament*, it has put a wild emphasis on the mod community. It is open-source by design, which means if you want something new or a crazy new mode variety it won't take much looking (and downloading) to get it.













XBOX ONE ELITE CONTROLLER

MANUFACTURER: **MICROSOFT** PRICE: **£119.99**

IF WE HAD to pick one stand-out feature of the Xbox One Elite controller it would be the click sound that the magnets on the D-pad make when it snaps onto the controller. We know it sounds odd, but that is the sort of sound that dreams are made of. Thankfully, we don't just have to pick one feature – what kind of review would that be?

The replaceable D-pad (and sticks) are exceptionally well-done; it takes less 15 seconds to change all three, and you get a good selection of options in the included carry case. The other massive sell for us was the addition of hair-triggers – flick a small, physical switch on the back of the controller and the triggers stop half-way; perfect for shooters. The additional rear triggers were more hit and miss… which is to say we kept hitting them by accident. Still, our podgy fingers shouldn't be a strike against the controller – especially as these triggers are just as easy to attach and remove.

Button customisation is straightforward, too; the Xbox's built-in app allows you to map buttons, change dead zones and trigger sensitivity, and lets you create two custom presets that can be switched at any moment. The price is the real sticking point, but you get a lot in the box – if you want to step up your game, there isn't a better way to do it.



XBOX ONE CHATPAD

We tested this alongside the Elite controller, which we soon realised was a mistake – that controller packs some extra weight over a standard Xbox One pad, and with the additional Chatpad the whole thing was much too heavy. Still, on a standard controller this did the business, speeding up typing tenfold. The included headset is a bonus for online players, and the two programmable buttons (which currently take screenshots or gameclips) are a nice touch.

Manufacturer: Microsoft
Price: £29.99



XBOX ONE DIGITAL TV TUNER

The Xbox was always sold as a multimedia console; yet, at launch, Microsoft failed to fully deliver on its promises. But now one small TV tuner is fixing that. The Tuner is easy to set up, and once it's plugged in you'll get all the Freeview channels, including HD, and access to the excellent OneGuide. You can pause a channel for up to 30 minutes, and even watch on your Windows or iOS mobile device. You can't use it as a recording device, though, so keep that in mind.

Manufacturer: Microsoft
Price: £24.99

GAMING CLOTHING



STREET FIGHTER SOCKS

The joy of these socks is that, when wearing shoes, nobody will suspect what is hiding on your foot. For all they know you just have bright socks, right? WRONG. They're *Street Fighter* themed, and therefore awesome.
www.numskull.co.uk



RARE T-SHIRT

For true gaming fans, few logos (or developers) are so widely loved as Rare. Now, with this officially licensed shirt, you can show off your love for the British company by emblazoning its logo on your chest.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



RYU VARSITY JACKET

If you want to show off your Ansatsuken skills outside of the dojo, this is the way to do it. With stylised SF and Ryu logos and a bright colour scheme, it's the perfect way to get into the *Street Fighter* mindset.
www.numskull.co.uk

SONIC BOOM MONOPOLY



SOLD BY: **AMAZON.COM** PRICE: **£29.99**

SONIC GOT A big redesign in his latest game, and the result was one of the most average of *Sonic* games in recent memory. Well guess what! Now it can be relived through a board game that is sure to cause some arguments among friends and family alike. The latest branded Monopoly lets you buy and trade your favourite characters, locations and even some of Tails' gadgets as you battle it out to force your opponents into bankruptcy. You know the drill here: it's Monopoly. Still, for all that *Sonic Boom* was a disappointment, we'd rather play this than regular Monopoly.
www.amazon.com

XCOM: THE BOARD GAME

SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£40.99**

WITH *XCOM 2* still drawing us back in months after release, there's never been a better time to try this *XCOM* board game, which sees you and up to three friends cooperating to try and stop the evil aliens from invading. That's right, this twist on the old board game mantra of 'play against your mates' changes things up by adding an external threat that will require teamwork and some lucky dice rolls to push back impending doom. The companion app puts another modern twist on the board game formula, making this a unique proposition.
www.forbiddenplanet.com

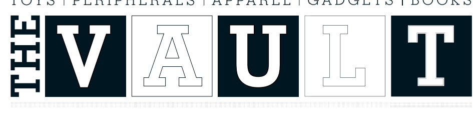


THE WITCHER ADVENTURE GAME



SOLD BY: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£40.99**

EVERY ADVENTURE IS different in this *Witcher* board game, which puts you in the shoes of one of four heroes and sends you off on a quest to defeat monsters and build your reputation. Each character has their own unique skills and abilities, giving players a different experience every time they play. Race your opponents to complete the most quests and gain the most renown as Geralt of Rivia, Triss Merigold, the minstrel Dandelion, or Yarpen Zigrin the dwarf.
www.forbiddenplanet.com





THE UNOFFICIAL GAME & WATCH COLLECTOR'S GUIDE

PUBLISHER: **BIENENGRÄBER**

FOR RETRO COLLECTORS out there, finding the right time to buy or sell, and knowing what kind of price to expect for each item you're bidding on, can be really tough. It can take hours of research for every single item before you can really know the kind of price you should be paying, and what you can expect from the product.

That alone is surely a good enough reason to pick up this unofficial guide for collector's of Nintendo's first foray into electronic gaming. Covering every single one of Nintendo's Game & Watch portables, this book gives you statistics, historical context for each one, and even looks at the clones that appeared at the time. You'll even get a history lesson explaining how Nintendo graduated from card games and other toys to the gaming giant we know and love today.

Each handheld device gets two pages, on which you will find all kinds of interesting (and useful) information about the game. Of course there are descriptions of how each game plays, but you'll also find details on the number of auctions (broken down into sections depending on the state of the devices), as well as a price guide so you know when you're getting a good deal on your purchase or sale, perfect for knowing what to keep an eye out for. One really nice touch is the inclusion of a modern day section for each game. If a Game & Watch title has been ported to a newer console, such as the Wii U, you'll find details on the page, too – great for people who can't afford to splash out hundreds of pounds but still want to play the games.

www.gameandwatch.at

VERDICT 9/10



BEFORE MARIO

Before becoming the company we know today, Nintendo was a fairly successful toy company. This book, which is packed full of photos of the toys themselves, explores that genuinely interesting history. The design keeps things simple, but the photos are the real star here – the toys captured look fantastic.

www.omakebooks.com



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: ILLIDAN

World Of Warcraft fans should prepare for another backstory, as Illidan Stormrage gets his own book. This adventure follows the hero as he is wrongly imprisoned by his own people, before being freed from his bonds to fight against the Legion, demons who seek to invade Azeroth.

www.titanbooks.com



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TWILIGHT PRINCESS HD COLLECTOR'S EDITION GUIDE

This Link adventure got a little lost between the Gamecube and Wii, but its release on the Wii U offers a chance to be reminded how majestically excellent it is. This guide isn't bad either.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



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